

The Wise One

Book Two: Awakening

Arc One

So It Begins

From darkness to light

From warmth to the cold

The shadows grow bright

It's as I was told

Silence to sound

None hear my cry

Friends gather around

None meet my eye

I am being born

Life wants to break me

My loyalties torn

I am awakening

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

Oscar Wilde

“There's a place I see you follow me

Just a taste of all that might come to be

I'm alone but holding breath you can breathe

To question every answer counted"

"Forget It" — Breaking Benjamin

Chapter One

The mug by his hand slid over the scarred wood of the table, retreating from him. He barely noticed. There was a sound of liquid pouring, then the mug slid back into place. His eyes stayed locked on the creased yellowish page in front of him, carefully reading the small text that had so fascinated him. His hand curved slowly around the handle of the mug, a piece of glazed pottery with a silhouette of the Sydney Opera House on it. He picked it up, took a sip, and set it back down.

Harry Potter finally came to the realization that his coffee had been refilled.

"Thank you, Kreacher," he said, quiet since Kreacher was still in the kitchen, rinsing the coffeepot out in the sink.

Kreacher didn't respond, so Harry turned back to the newspaper and took another sip of coffee. Sirius wasn't awake yet, but Harry had been up for an hour. He'd woken up when something in his stomach had fluttered and he'd felt a burst of happiness that had nothing to do with him. He hadn't been having clear pictures from Voldemort the last few weeks, only these strange impressions a time or two. Harry felt sick when he thought of it, knowing that Voldemort was happy because he had his body back and he was gathering his old followers to him.

Just then, Sirius plodded into the kitchen, his hair hanging in a tousled mess of curls over squinted eyes. His feet were shod in the same old slippers, and Harry could tell the things were really ready for retirement. Not that he was about to suggest that Sirius break his one and only tie to his . . . lover? Fiancée? She'd been far more than a girlfriend, but whatever she'd been, there would be no tracing her or her brother after they'd run from Barty Crouch. Harry knew Sirius took it hard (even though he'd never say it) that they had lost, for good, the only people Sirius and he had ever considered family. The slippers could stay.

"Any coffee?" he mumbled.

Harry shook his head apologetically. "I drank it, sorry. I'll make some more."

He got up, but Sirius was looking meaningfully at Kreacher, who had just finished drying the pot and was replacing it. The house elf was giving him a very hostile look, and turned back to the sink to fill the pot with water without saying a word. Harry, his lips compressed with the tension of not saying anything insulting, gently pried the coffeepot away from Kreacher.

"It's all right, I'll make it. I shouldn't have had so much, anyway," he added, trying very hard to make the cheerful tone sound convincing. He'd told Sirius he didn't like the attitude he gave Kreacher, but Sirius was not receptive to the idea that Kreacher deserved any better. Harry knew that Kreacher had contributed to the ostracisation that Sirius had experienced in his childhood home, and that Kreacher had very nearly freed Peter Pettigrew to escape yet again, but he couldn't blame the elf for doing what he was asked by people who were kind to him. If Sirius wanted results, he ought to be kind. He could at least be polite, if he had no respect to show. Common courtesy was a nice gesture for beings inhabiting the same house.

Sirius sighed, and pulled over the front section of the newspaper that Harry had finished with. Harry had begun picking up on his habit of reading the paper every day—which was only natural, Sirius knew, but was still amused by a boy who'd just turned fifteen spending his Saturday morning with a cup of coffee and the paper.

"There's an article about us in there," Harry said casually.

Sirius jumped and nearly tore *The Daily Prophet* in two when his grip tightened on it. He was awake now, Harry reckoned. He couldn't help laughing a little.

"Merlin, Harry, don't say things like that," Sirius scolded.

"No, there really is," Harry insisted. "It's just about us being the Rivers family. They're reporting that you're taking on the Defense job and that I'm the first transfer student Hogwarts has had in about twenty years. Apparently, we don't occasion much comment, the article's

about a paragraph long. There's a letter in the editorials begging you and I to come home that's much longer."

Sirius rolled his eyes. Ever since the edition that had declared Pettigrew's arrest and Sirius' pardon, there'd been about five letters a day to that effect. Why the public was so concerned, Harry didn't know, except that his parents had been well-thought of, the more so for becoming martyrs, and it was more exciting than the Chudley Cannons' abominable performance in their last game. There were also some letters, which pointedly named no names, talking about the rumours that You-Know-Who was back. These rumours were, for the most part, being firmly and politely rejected. There was some less eloquent and more adamant resistance, but there were also a few letters (written under pseudonyms, of course) stating their belief that the rumours were true. It was all just speculation to them, Harry thought with disbelief as he measured out the coffee and started the pot. They weren't taking it seriously; it was more like a scholarly debate being carried out in public.

They'd forgotten what Voldemort was capable of.

Harry had a long, ugly scar on his arm to remind him, if his status as an orphan wasn't enough. He was facing no temptation to laugh it off as paranoia. He didn't have that luxury.

He took up the newspaper again while the coffee was brewing, but he ended up just looking around the kitchen. It was an island of cleanliness in a horrid mess of a home. They'd given the bedrooms as many Tergeo spells as possible and determined to get more serious about cleaning when they were ready to tackle the whole house. But Harry hadn't been able to stomach a dirty kitchen. He'd cast the cleaning charms he knew, then bought some scrub brushes, bleach, and vinegar at the corner store. The kitchen sparkled, now. Kreacher had even gotten into the spirit when he'd seen how determined Harry was, and it was his bony old hands that had rid the baseboards and cupboards of the stubborn mildew that refused to respond to the most demanding Scourgify Harry could muster. Harry had even made the effort of walking a few extra miles to purchase some hand towels, and some curtains for the little window above the sink.

Sirius was not happy about the money. Their Muggle money was nearly gone, and their available wizarding money was dwindling quickly. Sirius still had nearly half his inheritance in Gringotts, and he assured Harry that there was plenty of money in the Potter vault, as well. The trouble was that they couldn't access it so long as they weren't officially here. Still, even Sirius seemed to appreciate how much better the kitchen looked, and said cheerfully that they'd live just fine on his teaching salary until Voldemort was gone or they were outed.

Sirius laid the newspaper aside so he could get up and pour his coffee, giving Kreacher another dirty look. He seemed to realize that Harry wasn't reading his section of the paper.

"Nothing much of interest today, hmm?"

"Not that I didn't already know. It's nice, having a secret society around to deliver all the news before it makes the paper." Harry gave the pages in his hands a stern look. "If it makes the paper."

"The Order gets things done," Sirius agreed. "I've got to talk to you about something, by the way."

"Anything to do with the meeting I wasn't invited to?"

"Hey, I don't get invited to the bigger ones, either. Once I start teaching, I'll be able to publicly declare that John Rivers is against Voldemort to anyone who'll listen, but in the Order, only about half of 'em know I'm here. This was a private meeting, just the old bunch, so they all knew me. The point is, they want the house."

"What, this one? They can have it."

"We're going to use it as headquarters. It's an ideal location. It won't be used during the school year, for the most part, and there are only a couple of people who know of it right now. Peter's in jail, so he's harmless—can't believe I told him about this place, anyway—and then it's just us, really."

“Yeah, but we can’t be sure that someone in the Order won’t talk.”

“Oh, yes, we can.”

“Your belief in your allies is admirable, but—”

“Fidelius Charm.”

“Oh, that one’s . . . wait, don’t tell me . . .”

Harry jumped up and ran upstairs for the book he knew contained a description of the charm. He recalled that it was complex, and if he was not mistaken, Sirius had told him that his parents had used one. He found what he was looking for quickly, and got even angrier with Pettigrew for what he’d done to Harry’s parents. If he’d gone into some kind of hiding, they would have all been safe as . . . well, babes in a cradle was definitely the wrong metaphor for this situation.

Downstairs, Sirius was thoroughly amused, despite being abandoned to a few minutes alone with the detestable house elf. Harry could’ve just asked him to explain. But no, books held all the answers. It was probably Sirius’ fault, he’d been the one to constantly tell Harry to study hard and that he could find the answers to his questions. Maybe Harry should have had more friends growing up.

Harry tromped back downstairs after a few minutes and gave Sirius a level look.

“Who’s going to be Secret-Keeper?”

“Professor Dumbledore,” Sirius answered, accepting the cup of coffee that Kreacher handed him, at least giving the courtesy of nodding his head at the servant.

Harry looked thoughtful, giving it a thorough going-over in his head, and shrugged. “Probably the best person for it.”

“Glad it meets with your approval.”

Harry made a face. “I thought you trusted my judgment.”

“Oh, sometimes. When there’s no veela hookers involved, anyway.”

Harry’s face became even more disgruntled. “You had to bring that up.”

“Or beautiful blonde book managers . . .”

“Shut up, Sirius.”

“Or mysterious women with brown eyes, unless I mistake my guess. Maybe we ought to just keep you away from women in general. Who’s got brown eyes, Harry?”

“Me,” he grunted.

As if reminded, he reached up to rub his eyes, which were still not fully comfortable with the lenses. Sirius snatched him by the wrist and lowered his arm back down to the table, without disturbing the full mug of coffee poised at his lips. Harry, far from being upset, grinned.

“Remember the arm-wrestling at the bar?”

Sirius grinned back. “I never did beat Miguel, did I?”

“Aw, almost.”

“Wonder how they are?”

Harry’s smile faded at how closely Sirius’ thoughts mirrored his own of a few minutes ago. He tried for optimistic. “We can find them, you know. After this is all over.”

“No,” Sirius said, shaking his head. “Catalina’s married and having babies, by now. I’m going to leave her alone.”

Harry didn’t like the sudden burst of melancholy that was falling over the bright kitchen. He propped his arm on the table and held his hand up. He forced himself to grin again. Sirius chuckled, braced his own arm on the table, and clasped Harry’s hand.

“Go,” he said, in a bored tone. Harry’s hand was pressed against the table in a few seconds, before Sirius even started to look like he was trying. “Guess you need to work out a little more.”

“Couldn’t have anything to do with me being barely fifteen and you being a large, very fit man.”

“Naw, you’re just scrawny. Got more muscle on you than James had at your age, that’s something.”

Harry stood up. “You want to spar a while?”

“We have more pressing things to do,” Sirius answered, sipping his coffee.

“Like what?”

“Like make this house inhabitable. And get it ready for a lot of company. If we’re going to use it for headquarters, we’ve got to get it into shape.”

Harry wrinkled his nose. “It’ll wait an hour. Come on.”

They changed clothes and went into the (mostly) empty room they’d been using for practice sessions since they’d moved in. They hadn’t been able to get the family tree off the wall, but neither of them could stand looking at the blasted and burned surface of that testament to pureblood mania, so they’d hung sheets over it, and brought in a radio to make it seem more cheerful in here. They tuned in to the recently discovered Wizarding Wireless Network, found the songs particularly unsuitable to an impromptu sparring match, and decided to practice in silence. The music was better at night.

They each fell into an opening stance. With much ribbing about the other’s physique and technique, they fell to it. It was a comfortable routine, to come in here and work up a sweat, work off some frustration. They’d been doing this in one home or another for several years, now, and constantly honed each other’s skills by trying to

surprise someone whose instincts they knew so well. Obviously, they didn't get out much, so this was their only way to have fun.

"Oh, I forgot something," Sirius said, about halfway to exhausted and not ready to give up yet.

Harry, who had tied a strip of cloth around his forehead to stop the sweat, stepped back with his hands up in a time-out to adjust the cloth from falling over his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling this isn't going to be something I'll like?"

"It's only fair play," Sirius said, taking the opportunity to mop sweat from his own face. "You've been sitting on something unpleasant for two days. What is it?"

"You first," Harry said with narrow eyes.

Sirius sighed. "We have to go to the school."

Harry shrugged. "So what?"

"You have to get Sorted."

"What, you mean, into a House?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Do I have to wear the hat?"

"Afraid so."

"Is Headmaster Dumbledore going to be there?"

"It's kept in his office."

"Damn," Harry said grimly.

"Yeah," Sirius agreed.

“No, I mean, damn, mine is worse than yours. That’s not actually that bad.”

“Oh. Well, what is it you’ve been wanting to say to me? Get it off your chest, already.”

Harry sighed, and lowered himself into a stance. “If you don’t call your friend Remus, I’m going to kick your arse,” he stated plainly.

Sirius felt a jolt to his stomach that had him thinking he’d missed it and Harry had already carried out his threat. He hadn’t seen Remus. Not once. He’d expected to run into him at an Order meeting, but Remus hadn’t been there. Harry had obviously found out, somehow. Sirius knew Harry wouldn’t look in his mind without permission, but maybe he’d been thinking about it so strongly that it had skimmed the surface and Harry hadn’t been able to help it. Or maybe Dumbledore had said something to Harry without him knowing.

Still, he leapt forward and tried to take the teeth out of Harry’s threat by pinning him to the floor. It didn’t last; Harry threw him off and they found themselves back on their feet trying to kick each other to death. When Harry had him down on the ground with his arm over Sirius’ throat and his legs well balanced on the floor, Sirius could have (probably) thrown him off, but instead he gave in.

“I’ll talk to him,” he sighed.

“Good.”

“After your Sorting.”

Harry sat in the corner of the headmaster’s office. Dumbledore and Sirius waited quietly but anxiously, and Fawkes appeared to be sleeping, his head tucked under his wing and ignoring the whole process. Maybe he was just the only one in the office who realized Harry was embarrassed and was trying to give him a break.

The Hat, which had spoken very jovially about having to Sort a student who was so much older than normal, and seemed to be happy about the challenge, was silent on his head for several long

moments. Harry could hear a soft muttering—the Hat was talking to itself. He looked at the faces of Sirius and Dumbledore, still unmoving and impatient, and realized they couldn't hear it. Well, how convenient. Maybe he could talk to the Hat without speaking, without the other men knowing what they were saying. Hopefully the Hat would agree to a private conversation.

You mind telling me what you're thinking? Harry thought at the Hat, hoping it worked. Silently?

Of course silently, the Hat answered, seeming to sneer at him. I wouldn't be so impolite. I was merely trying to sort through the complexities of your mind.

Harry tried to hold back a snicker. Complexities of his mind, indeed.

You have an interesting Animagus form, don't you?

The headmaster doesn't know about that! Harry thought at the Hat in a near panic. That secret was between himself, Sirius, and Two Rivers, who had been dead for two years.

I see. You think you are wise, do you? Fascinated by the night, by secrets, by the dead? The owl is a messenger of the dead in some cultures, you know.

Harry didn't like the insinuation he saw in the words, so close to what he'd been thinking about himself all summer: that he was some kind of harbinger of doom for England, just by being who he was. The owl is a symbol for change, and being comfortable with one's inner self. The owl sees behind masks and into dark places to find truth. It is good at being silent, it is a messenger of secrets, and is surrounded by mystery.

Who told you all that?

A Native American shaman. The one who taught me how to become an Animagus. When I was nine.

You're not the least bit smug, either, the Hat said sarcastically.

Maybe just a little defensive, Harry admitted, a bit amused by himself. It was a damned Hat, not a judge at a sentencing. Sorry for the interruption. You were saying?

The Hat seemed a little surprised by the apology. This is why I don't Sort teenagers, it groused as it went back to shuffling through his brain. Well, I see you're quite an academic. You love your books and scholarly debates, don't you? Still . . . you would never hide behind them. You're plenty devious, so capable of secrets. But look at all this loyalty to your godfather, and those you love. You will never be accused of having no principles, that's certain. Perhaps Ravenclaw.

Tell me which House will help me the furthest toward my goals in life.

I see many goals. Which do you mean?

They all lead in the same direction.

A world without fear . . . A world you can share with your loved ones. And yet you are willing to sacrifice yourself, if it means your loved ones will be safe without you. You are very noble—keeping secrets is only in the interest of protecting this ideal world of yours. Is that about right?

Just about.

Harry was bemused and feeling a bit lost by the Hat's description of him. It sounded heroic. But he wasn't. Heroic, that is. Not in the least. He was a selfish teenager whose godfather indulged him to no end and who had no idea what would be required of him, how much he could handle. He'd been dishonest his entire life, in the interest of protecting . . . protecting Sirius, he had to admit. For himself, he might not have cared. It was Sirius that mattered and that he kept secrets for, Sirius that made him feel like he, Harry, was worth the effort of protecting. Miguel, and Catalina. He would protect them at all costs, too. Maybe even Anna. Didn't she deserve it just as much as they did? Didn't Sascha, and Madeleine the mayor's daughter, and Mona and Jonny? Where did he get off, thinking all those people were his to protect?

Gryffindor, then. I see so much of Slytherin in you, but you have far too much nobility and selfless courage to be suited to that house.

All right, Harry said calmly, thinking he should have seen this coming, though he hadn't. Just like my father, right?

No, the Hat replied, a little bit soberly. Not just like him, but very close.

"Gryffindor," the Hat announced aloud.

Both men relaxed visibly.

"That took way too long for something I already knew," Sirius said wryly.

"We had a lot to talk about," Harry shrugged. "Thanks," he said to the Hat. "I guess you don't have a hand to shake, do you?"

"Appreciate the thought, though," the Hat muttered as Dumbledore took it and placed it on a high shelf, his blue eyes shining with pride.

Harry looked over at the phoenix's perch. Fawkes looked back at him and trilled happily.

Chapter Two

Sirius stood across the street from The Leaky Cauldron. He hadn't been inside the establishment since he was twenty-one years old. He wasn't eager to return there today. Last time he'd been here, he and James had a few pints to toast the Potters going into hiding, while Lily was home with a napping Harry and Remus and Wormtail were off on one of Dumbledore's assignments. The next time he'd seen his best friend, James was laying dead but not yet cold in the ruins of the house that Sirius had never been allowed to see before it had been comprised.

There were no happy memories here.

So why was he going in? For he would, eventually, when he found the courage. Remus was in there, waiting for him. He was always early for everything, so he'd be in there by now. He was probably sipping a glass of water and passing the time by wondering if Sirius would even show up. Remus had never been much of a drinker, he had too much self-control—had practically worshiped self-control. After hearing he'd quit his job out of fear of endangering the kiddies at the school, Sirius knew Remus hadn't changed much.

But why should he do this? It couldn't only be because Harry was planning to pound his arse into the ground if he didn't—as he knew Harry could do if he really wanted to. No, he needed his own reasons. But why should he be so worried? It turned out that neither of them was the traitor that had gotten the Potters killed, so what was the problem?

It was Harry. He was angry that Remus hadn't saved the boy from the Dursleys. But he was afraid that Remus would be angry with him for doing so without talking to him, as well. He had no real justification for that, other than cowardice. He could have found and talked to his old friend at any time. He hadn't. He wasn't sure he could explain why, not without a lot of grief, and it would be awfully useless to go in there without an explanation.

“Oh, go on,” he said to himself impatiently, stepping off the curb and preparing to cross the street. “You used to be such a self-important little berk, and now you’re dithering around like a—”

A car horn blared at him, and he leapt forward to avoid being struck.

“Get out of the road!” the driver roared, shaking a fist out the window.

“Sod off!” Sirius shouted back, then winced. He was the one walking out into traffic because he was distracted. He was at fault, and here he was picking a fight? He shook his head, and gave the man in the car an apologetic inclination of his head. Maybe it was best to go in with the subdued attitude he couldn’t shake, not a constructed swagger. Maybe it would help to show Remus that he had changed a great deal since they’d last seen each other, not try to conjure up the youthful persona he no longer resembled.

He pushed open the door and took a deep breath. Tom, he of the head like a dried walnut, was still behind the bar, just like he had been for the past fifteen years. Sirius doubted he’d remember the black-haired youth who’d raised his glass to what turned out to be a death trap, but it still took him a moment to remember that he didn’t even look like that anymore. Merlin, but being in England was making him jumpy.

He looked around, casting his eyes over the entire interior of the pub, and frowned. Maybe Remus wasn’t here yet. Then his eyes returned to the table in the smoky, dark recesses of the far corner, where sat a man in patched robes. His longish brown hair, gone gray at the temples, framed a narrow and tired face with an obvious scar on the right cheek below the eye. It was him. He looked sickly and older than his thirty-five years, which inexplicably made Sirius angry, but he tempered it quickly. Sirius thought of all the many transformations Remus had been through the last fourteen years, without his friends to help him and hold him back. He had every right to look that way. Sirius didn’t look like any spring chicken, either.

Sirius approached cautiously, and Remus watched him come with eyes that told him nothing. Remus had always been good at maintaining a calm façade, no matter what was going on inside him.

He did briefly look away, to signal the bartender, who hurried over with a short glass in each hand. Remus gestured to the empty chair at the table, and Sirius sat down. Before he could speak a word, the glasses—smoking thickly—were set down before them.

Sirius stared at something he hadn't seen a hint of in years. "That's not . . ."

"Rochester's Gold Label," supplied Tom, sounding proud.

"I thought you might like it," Remus said, sounding neutral in front of the stranger but telling Sirius exactly what he needed to know. He heard what Remus couldn't say while Tom was standing there. Remus remembered the firewhiskey he used to order as a special treat. I remember everything, and I want to make it right.

Despite this, Sirius' nerves were shot to hell, and he downed the drink in one go. He let his breath out explosively, having forgotten just how good the stuff was. "Ah, thank you," he sighed. It settled in his stomach like the warm glow of heaven.

"I'll have a pint of bitter," he told Tom, who nodded and hurried off again, knowing when he wasn't wanted.

Remus toyed with his glass, somehow managing to look both amused and stern. He'd perfected that look early on in life. Sirius couldn't count the number of times he'd been the recipient of it.

"I'm not looking to go out on a bender, you know," he said calmly.

"Neither am I."

Remus raised an eyebrow.

"Not that I need to explain myself to you," Sirius said sharply, "but this will be it for me. I have a kid waiting for me at home who, despite knowing a good hangover cure and being no stranger to the condition, will nevertheless be bloody upset if I show up pissed, since he was the one who made me call you."

And that was all the invitation the conversation needed. Remus wasn't even looking at his glass, the smoke of which was starting to dissipate as he nervously played his fingers over the rim.

"Harry . . . how is he?" he asked, his voice cagey and a little hoarse.

Sirius shrugged, and paused for a moment to exchange his empty glass for the full pint glass being placed before him. He waited until they were very thoroughly alone in their dark corner before he answered.

"Let's call him Evan while we're here, please."

Remus looked like he wanted to respond, opening his mouth, but he just nodded sharply.

"Either way, he's great. Kind of going stir-crazy, pretty much locked up in the house, but then, so am I."

"If you want to be believable, you ought to be seen," Remus said soberly. "As someone who just moved here, you ought to be getting out, not going into hiding."

Sirius toyed with his drink, but didn't pick it up. "We're staying under the radar as much as possible, but we are making a very public shopping trip to Diagon Alley for his school supplies next week."

"You're staying under . . . what?"

Sirius grinned. It wasn't often that someone could confuse Remus Lupin. "Sorry. Just means keeping a low profile. It's a Muggle expression. I've got a million of 'em, most from when we lived in America."

Remus' face was nearly comical. "Where have you been?"

Sirius sighed deeply and crackled his knuckles in dramatic preparation. This could take a while.

“We went to New York, but we only spent a few weeks there deciding where to go next. We spent over a year in Wyoming, in a little desert town called White Valley that was not exactly a wizard town but did know about magic. Let’s see . . . several months in Kyoto, Japan, where Evan spent most of the time learning Buddhist meditation techniques and practicing aikido, while I spent most of it with hookers. A year in Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. I was working there, and Evan was going to a Muggle school.” He tried to keep his voice level, but the faces of his Brazilian “family” swam to the surface of his mind, as they always did when he thought about living there. “Then another year in South Africa, in a little wizard town all populated by the descendants of white colonists, we hardly ever saw true Africans. Evan was getting rather unprofessionally tutored by a crappy Dutch teacher and I was going crazy. Then there were several months in another wizarding village in Austria, not far from Salzburg, where Evan got some advanced Potions training and I . . .” He smiled, fleetingly. “Organized a network of werewolves and kept the locals safe from a nest of vampires. Most recently and for about a year, Brisbane, like we’ve been telling everybody, where Evan decided to try his hand at being a Muggle eighteen-year-old and I taught Defense coursework to twelve and thirteen year old boys.”

Remus was gaping at him. “I was expecting it to be a simple question,” he said weakly. “You know, ‘the wizarding underground of Chicago,’ or something.”

Sirius snorted at the very idea. “We stayed on the move.”

“Wasn’t it hard for Ha—Evan to have to leave his friends all the time to hare around the world?”

Sirius shrugged, feeling guilty, which led to irrational anger. “He never really had any. We had some friends in Brazil. Good friends. He thought we should stay there, but it was . . . never mind. And he had this girl in Australia, but he knew he shouldn’t have gotten involved with her.”

Remus appeared to realize there was much more to it that he wasn’t allowed to ask about, at least not yet. He abruptly downed his drink, making a face that implied he was drinking poison.

“Urk. Give me a good cider any day,” he muttered. Then he looked Sirius directly in the eyes for the first time this whole meeting. “I didn’t come here just to catch up. I came to find out . . .” So calm up till now, just as Sirius remembered him, Remus shocked him when he abruptly turned on the angry rout, leaning on the table and eyes shooting fire. “How could you do that? How could you just leave and let everyone think Evan was dead? And that you were a murderer? Scratch that, you’ve always had the balls for it, that answers the ‘how.’ Why would you?”

Sirius, maybe just taking his cue from Remus, maybe just to release the left-over feelings he hadn’t gotten out with Dumbledore, followed him into anger. It was only too easy, especially for men who’d been so close as children and adolescents.

“It’s pretty easy,” he hissed. “Because nobody else would.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Didn’t you ever see where he lived?”

“No,” Remus answered, short and without explanation.

“The Dursleys hated him, they hated everything he stood for. They treated him like dog shit on their shoes. They abused him. I saw them starve him and lock him up with my own eyes.”

Remus looked stunned. “Locked him up?” he muttered.

“James and Lily were your friends as well, Remus. You ought to have been there. You ought to have taken him out of there long before I got free and did it. He’d already lost his parents, there he was losing his humanity—I couldn’t allow it.” Sirius was nearly panting with anger, and he clamped one very firm hand on Remus’ wiry forearm. Remus grunted in surprise and tried to pull back, but Sirius gripped him tight, digging into his pocket with his other hand and tossing a few coins on the table. “We need someplace more private,” he said roughly, and then a cracking noise, horrendously loud in the enclosed space, announced to the pub that the two had departed.

Remus jerked his arm away as soon as they had landed firmly on the ground at their destination—the hallway of Sirius' house.

"Where are we?" he demanded roughly.

Sirius didn't answer, too preoccupied with closing the curtains over his mother's shrieking portrait. "Should have known I'd wake her," he grunted in staccato, yanking at the curtains with each word. "Oh, do shut up, you ugly hag," he snapped as she wailed about blood traitors and vermin.

"What in Merlin's—oh, ugh, it's your mother."

"Remember her, do you?"

"Not really. But the portrait does sound very like that Howler she sent you when you moved in with the Potters. This is the old family place, is it?" he asked with interest, anger momentarily forgotten as he looked around.

Sirius grimaced at the sight. They'd gotten rid of the dust, but little else. There was still a troll's leg full of musty, moth-eaten umbrellas next to them that he'd nearly tripped over when they arrived. He decided viciously that it would be the first thing to go when he and Harry got to work.

"What are we doing here?"

"Talking. Without an audience."

"Right. I believe it was your turn?" Remus said sharply.

Sirius hardly thought the hallway was the place, and hoped that Harry was up in his room listening to music or something.

"All I was saying was that Harry was being abused and neglected by the only family he even knew he had, and no son of James and Lily was going to live like that if I could help it." The finish was a little lame,

after the interruption. Maybe he should have taken his chances at the Leaky Cauldron.

"I think you were saying more than that."

Sirius clenched his teeth in an effort not to bare them and growled. "You're right. I was accusing you of being just as bad by ignoring the situation. You could have done something about it."

"Oh?" Remus said, his eyebrow up. "Like what? Petition the Ministry to give me care of a little boy? Me, the werewolf? Me, complicit in the greatest treachery of the war? You think they would have given Harry to me?"

"You could have tried."

"And what did I have to offer?" Remus snarled—in his anger, he sounded just as much like a wolf as a man, reminding Sirius uneasily of the transformation he'd witnessed so many times. "I didn't even have the assurance I would have a roof over my head from month to month. We all joked about it when we were kids, Sirius, but being a werewolf is no picnic. Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to find work, to put food on the table? I would never bring a child into a home like that. I would never bring a child into my home at all. I simply can't take that risk."

Sirius raked him with the most scathing look he could muster—which was decently scathing, all things considered. "You haven't changed at all, have you? Still hiding behind your condition to cover up your lack of courage."

"Courage isn't my problem!" Remus shouted, his face red with fury, making the white scar under his eye stand out even more. "I don't have a problem! This is about the fact that you've never had one ounce of common sense! You could have talked to me, Sirius! I would have listened to you if you'd come to me and told me the truth, even if you'd brought Harry with you. I would have believed you. I would have helped," he finished, his voice much quieter but sounding ragged and tired. "I would have helped you, if I'd known."

Was he trying to convince Sirius, or himself?

“Why would I seek you out?” Sirius asked in disbelief. “I didn’t see you making any Sunday visits to ask me for my side of the story. I didn’t see any reason to explain myself to someone who didn’t care.”

“Didn’t care?” Remus hissed out, pain flashing in his eyes, a deep, unspeakable pain that brought shame to Sirius. “As if I could avoid caring, caring so much it hurt! What was I supposed to do, Sirius? By all reports, you’d gone completely starkers and murdered two of your three best friends, along with a whole street full of Muggles. You were expecting me to come see you, to watch you raving like a madman, and risk getting thrown in beside you as an accomplice?”

“No,” Sirius said, changing tactics, lowering his voice. “I was too busy trying to hang onto my sanity to worry about whether anybody else thought it was working. And then, when I was out, Harry was the only thing that mattered to me. I had to see him safe. That was what was important. I wanted to find Wormtail, of course. Wanted it so bad I could taste it. But after all, what would James have wanted from me? Revenge, or a home for his son? I had to make the choice, so I did. And I chose right, dammit. Wormtail could wait, you could wait, but Harry needed to be loved before he lost the ability to believe it could happen. I got him away from those horrible people, I gave him a home, and I loved him so much I forgot how I’d lived before I took him.”

Remus was staring at him. Sirius knew he’d stopped shouting, stopped sounding the least bit angry at all, and had reverted to something entirely different. Was he confessing? Perhaps he was. Confessing that he loved his godson didn’t seem like such a bad thing.

“So you do? Love him?”

Sirius rubbed his face in his hands. “You sound surprised.”

“I never thought . . .”

“He’s James’ son, Moony.” He hadn’t meant to use the comfortable old nickname, but there it was and there was no taking it back. Maybe he didn’t want to take it back. “I had to make it up to James, and I tried so hard to raise Harry right, but after a while, it stopped being about that. I love him for himself, not just who his father was.”

Remus didn’t seem to know how to answer that. But that was all right, because he didn’t have to, someone else did.

“That’s good to hear,” a casual voice said from Sirius’ left and Remus’ right. They both whipped their heads around to see Harry leaning against the doorjamb of the exercise room, wearing loose pants and nothing else, a bow staff clutched lightly in one hand and sweat shining along his hairline. “I was so worried that you were only pretending to care about me,” he said in obvious sarcasm, giving Sirius a cheeky grin.

“I thought you were upstairs,” Sirius said slowly.

“But I’m not,” Harry replied, sounding almost cheerful. “What happened to The Leaky Cauldron?”

Sirius shrugged, smiling lopsidedly at Harry’s off-beat sense of humour that could find this whole thing so amusing and turn it around like this. “We were making far too much noise for a Saturday afternoon.”

“Merlin,” Remus choked out. He was staring at Harry, his eyes drinking him in. Sirius didn’t blame him. Despite the things they’d chosen to hide in his appearance, it was so obvious to him, as it was obvious to Remus. Every inch of Harry was practically screaming, “I am James Potter’s son.”

Remus shook his head in wonderment. “It’s amazing. He even has James’ shape, his height . . .”

“Always did envy Prongs these,” Sirius said, slapping his hand affectionately against Harry’s defined abdominal muscles.

Remus smirked a bit. "Didn't we all. You're looking right fit there, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "I try." He was grinning comfortably.

This was Harry. All cool appeal and sardonic wit, and it was just like him to be completely unembarrassed about being half-naked and eavesdropping on two people arguing. Remus seemed to have forgotten that he was uncomfortable and upset, and was just looking at Harry like he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Of course, I looked almost as good in my day," Sirius sighed.

"Because you've got so much to complain about when you look in the mirror now." Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't try to play the old man card. You nearly killed me in practice yesterday."

"Practice?" Remus queried.

"I shouldn't have expected you to get past the fighting and on to talking about hobbies and interests yet, hmm?" Harry mused.

"I was hoping to save that for the next argument we have in front of twenty people."

Remus shook his head in disbelief. "So . . . we're not having an argument anymore, then. Well." Still looking a bit stricken, he put out his hand toward Harry. "It's wonderful to meet you, Harry."

Harry accepted the hand and shook it. "You as well, Mr. Lupin."

Remus flinched. "I could take Professor Lupin from the students, but I can't have you calling me that. Just Remus."

Harry shrugged. "All right." He finally straightened up, rising from his casual stance against the wall to squeeze between the two men. "I'm going to get a quick shower. You want me to put something together for tea time?"

Sirius shook his head. "I'll have Kreacher do it."

He knew that would net him a concerned look from Harry, but Harry just went upstairs wordlessly. Maybe he thought that having Remus around would keep the peace between him and the house elf. He was probably right, Sirius thought with amusement; Remus had always been the calming presence when he was going to fight with someone. It made their argument just now feel even more strange—when had he actually heard Moony yelling at anyone?

“You staying for tea, Moony?”

“If you think I can survive here for that long,” he said, suppressing a shudder as he followed Sirius to the kitchen. “How do you live here?”

“We’re going to get started cleaning it up tomorrow. I’ve offered it to Dumbledore as headquarters for the Order, so we have to get it in shape.”

“Kitchen doesn’t need any work, though.” Remus sounded impressed as they entered that haven of order and light.

“Harry and Kreacher spent two days in here. It’s the only room in the house we bother with, right now. All the other rooms are full of my parents’ old rubbish, dirt, and I think we’ve got a doxy infestation upstairs. I can’t guarantee there aren’t a few other creatures lurking somewhere.”

Sirius was getting out dishes and rummaging in the pantry to take stock of what was available. Kreacher appeared as if by magic in the doorway of the room.

“Master desires tea now?” he croaked out.

Sirius, in deference to Harry’s (heretofore unsuspected) delicate sensibilities, decided to be nice. “I’ll get it. Thank you, Kreacher.”

The house elf’s bulbous eyes seemed stunned, after what he’d been getting from Sirius so far. Sirius tried to feel bad about it, and couldn’t. Kreacher was a disrespectful and rotten old thing, no matter how nicely you dressed him up or how often you were polite to him.

“Master will let me do my duty, of course he will,” he muttered, not to be outdone, slinking into the room and trying to crowd Sirius away from the pantry. “I will serve tea to Master and his friends, like a good house elf must.”

“Great, then,” Sirius said, exasperated, and gestured for Remus to have a seat at the kitchen table. He joined him, explaining how they’d found this table in a junk shop and thought it was perfect after it had been scrubbed down.

Then they sat there in silence. Maybe they weren’t actively arguing, but Sirius didn’t think they’d adequately resolved any of the issues that they’d been shouting about. He didn’t know what questions to ask, whether it would be the right or wrong thing to simply start asking what Remus did for work or if he was seeing anyone. Once, long ago, they’d known everything about each other and not talking when they didn’t have anything to say was a comfortable and natural thing. They’d allowed the suspicions of war to strip them of that familiarity. It was a mark of how far apart they’d gone, Sirius thought, that being quiet was creating such tension, when they used to be able to sit around for hours just studying and maybe planning some new bit of mischief. Kreacher was banging things around and muttering too softly to be understood, but it didn’t really help.

Merlin, Harry, get down here, he thought plaintively. Maybe Harry would break his own rules, read Sirius’ mind from upstairs, and hear him. Right, of course he will . . .

“So, erm, obviously you’re not working at the school anymore,” Sirius said, too cheerfully, “What is it you’re doing now?” He winced.

But Remus smiled, obviously pleased with the question. “Collecting rare books for a Muggle.”

“Oh,” Sirius said, not having the faintest idea what that would entail. “And how is that going?”

“Very well,” Remus said, lacing his fingers together and looking devilish. “He tells me what he wants and I track it down for him. I’m

very mysterious about my methods, for obvious reasons. The other day, I delivered him a book he's been searching for going on three years, and he says, 'What you do is magic!' I had to bite my tongue to resist the impulse to say, 'Well, yeah,' like some cocky teenager. The students had far too great an influence on me when I was teaching."

Sirius chuckled. "What sort of thing do you use to find them?" Not an idle question; this line of work sounded truly fascinating.

"It's actually not so hard as it sounds," he admitted, losing the devilish look. "Many times, a book he can't find is simply in the possession of a wizard or witch, so I have my contacts in our world. Sometimes I have to use locator spells. There was one book he was looking for about six months ago that I couldn't find anywhere among private owners or the usual large collections, and then I was at Hogwarts to speak to the headmaster about an unrelated matter and I found it in the school library!"

Harry's feet thumped on the stairs, and Sirius was proud to realize that while Harry was certainly welcome, he no longer needed to be rescued. Harry poked his head in and said, "Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all, we're talking about work."

Remus was obliged to begin his explanation again, and Harry—as Sirius had suspected he would be—was intrigued by the occupation and had plenty of questions about it. Remus was very nearly a wizard treasure hunter.

"Aren't you going to have any tea?" was the only interruption Sirius made, when he realized Harry was not having any of the food or drink Kreacher laid out on the table for them.

Harry looked over at him, breaking the flow of conversation and said, "After all that coffee this morning? Are you kidding?" and returned his attention to the story Remus was telling him about the rather frightening negotiations carried out over a rare book in the possession of a man who'd been jailed for illegal vampire hunting. Sirius had to admit, it was a good story, but he wasn't used to Moony

of all people being more interesting than he was. He'd obviously gone and become far too stable a father figure.

Well, not many of those would have followed the kid around the world and let him do basically whatever the hell he wanted for six years so long as he promised to keep up with his studies. Maybe he wasn't turning into a stale old man just yet.

-o-o-o-

"So, we've got my required books and ink and replenished my Potions kit. Great. Any chance we could get my wand now?"

Sirius sighed through his nose and gave Remus a meaningful look.

Harry just raised an eyebrow at them. He'd like to see how they took almost two months with no wand of their own, forced to borrow their godfather's to clean the house and simply unable to do other magic—unless one counted Animagus transformation, which was what had been keeping Harry sane through the boredom. After a sporadic history of completing the transformation, in which he could have counted the number of times he'd done it on his hands, he'd taken to becoming an owl almost every night at dusk. He had to get out of the house for a while and clear his head of the mouldy, depressing atmosphere. He came back in the wee hours of the morning, and slept until nearly noon. He couldn't wait to get to Hogwarts, just so he'd have something requiring his time and attention during the day other than trying to find the motivation to clean something.

Of course, if he'd had a wand, he could have been practicing his spellwork in preparation for his first year in a real wizarding school. But no, it had to wait until their public appearance as father and son.

"Oh, all right," Sirius said slowly. "If we must."

Harry was not amused. Sirius gave him an elbow in the ribs and ruffled his hair.

"Aw, come on, Evan, the moody teenager thing doesn't become you."

Harry had to admit that he was right (the moody teenager thing didn't really become anybody) and also he was amused by the way Remus' eyes still looked surprised every time Sirius called him Evan. They'd gotten so used to it that Harry had begun to feel that Evan Rivers was a real person and he was just as much Evan as he was Harry. Maybe that was a good thing, maybe it wasn't, but either way, he just wanted his damned wand already.

"Okay, okay," he relented, but he scowled and he ran his hands through his hair in a fruitless attempt to tame it after Sirius' attention. Why people always did that, he didn't know. "Where are we going?"

"Ollivander's," Remus answered before Sirius could. "There's no better wandmaker in the world."

Harry could have debated that point, but thought such loyalty from Remus was derived from real skill on the part of Mr. Ollivander, so he was content to see what the man had to offer. He was also strangely comfortable with how quickly Remus had become a part of their lives. Last week, they hadn't known each other; this week Remus was spending all day with them shopping for school supplies.

He felt it as soon as they entered the shop. This was one of those fateful moments he'd been afraid of. Suddenly, despite being happy that Sirius was reestablishing his friendship with Remus, he wished the other man weren't here. Something deeply personal and important was about to happen, and he wished it could happen in privacy. Even letting Sirius see it was stretching it. But he wasn't afraid. He was excited. A thrill ran up his spine, and goose pimples raised on his arms. An old man with strangely luminous eyes stood there looking at him, his face reflecting the same feeling going through Harry—anticipation with a touch of anxiety.

"We're here for a wand," Sirius said, his voice sounding too loud in the hush of the shop. Harry winced. It seemed inappropriate, somehow. "I'm John Rivers, the new professor at Hogwarts, and this is my boy, Evan . . ." He trailed off to turn and gesture Harry forward, but then he didn't speak again. He frowned at the expression with which Mr. Ollivander was watching Harry's approach.

“And I think you know which one,” Harry said quietly.

The man blinked and seemed to start at being addressed by him. “Yes, of course,” he said automatically. “Happy to help.” He squinted at Harry. “Evan, was it?”

“Evan Rivers,” he said. His eyes blinked over the brown contact lenses. He tilted his head just slightly to one side to be sure his fringe was adequately covering his forehead—which had makeup on it to begin with, but there was safety in numbers, even numbers of disguises.

“Well, well,” the man said, rubbing his hands together with a touch too much enthusiasm. “Let’s get to work.” He retreated to the shelves and began selecting a few boxes from the precarious stacks of boxes that covered every inch of the shop. He handed them off to Remus and Sirius, encouraging Harry to try each one in turn. Remus and Sirius didn’t argue about being pressed into service as shop boys, simply handing Harry a new one as he held each and quietly shook his head and discarded it to one side. Nothing was feeling right. There were a few that felt just as well as the one he’d gotten in Brazil, with the lara hair core. But that one had never been entirely right for him, either, had it? Good enough for government work, but not what he’d imagined after hearing the way Sirius had described finding the perfect wand.

Finally, Mr. Ollivander approached him with one last box in his hands. He didn’t hand it off to either of the other two men. He walked toward Harry himself, seeming the slightest bit short of breath. Harry suddenly wanted to run. He wanted to leave the shop and go back to Australia to live with Anna and to never look back. Instead, he took the box, removed the lid, and pulled the wand out, moving slowly and smoothly as if in a dream. This was the one. The wand that fit into his hand as though Ollivander had made it specifically for him, though the date written on the box proved it had been crafted before he’d ever been born.

“I’ll take it,” he said, his voice sounding light and carefree and maybe a little confused.

Mr. Ollivander wasn't fooled. "I will tell no one, you can trust me."

"Tell them what?" Harry asked, his bored Australian drawl his only defence against those entirely too-sharp eyes.

"That wand contains a phoenix feather at its core," the man began.

"I can see that," Harry said, looking pointedly at the writing on the box.

"That particular phoenix only gave one other feather for wand-crafting. That other feather resided in the wand of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Harry tried to continue to look careless. "I've heard of him. Maybe he and I have something in common," he cracked, giving Sirius a crooked grin. "If you get me this one, I'll try not to murder everyone in their beds, Dad."

Sirius stood stiff as a poker, but he returned Harry's smile. "If that's the one you want," he said. It was a question. A powerful question.

"It is," Harry said, still calm. At this point, it didn't really surprise him, anyway. Why shouldn't he and Voldemort have matching wands? This whole thing had seemed so inevitable since the night of his arrival in England, he might as well stop trying so hard to fight it. At that thought, his back stiffened. Don't you dare think that way. This is your choice. It is always your choice.

"Yeah, this one," he said, meeting Mr. Ollivander's eyes again. "I will trust you," he said in a more sober voice. His eyes completed the thought without him saying it out loud. Don't make me regret it.

A/N: I know this chapter's a few hours early, but I'm pretty sure I won't get any complaints. I'm leaving on a camping trip first thing in the morning, so I won't have time to post it then. I just have to say, after getting such a flood of reviews already, that you guys are awesome, and I can't wait to share the rest of this story with you.

EDITED A FEW HOURS AFTER POSTING TO INCLUDE THIS:

Exciting news! Someone has nominated The Wise One: Book One: Becoming for a Quibbler Award! This is a new site, check it out at quibbler dot this-paradise dot com. (That you should vote for me while you happen to be browsing their site goes without saying.)

Chapter Three

With a sharp cracking sound, the full moon became Catalina's dead body, and Harry was most awfully glad that Sirius was not in the room. He didn't know what form Sirius' worst fear might take, but he didn't think Sirius would appreciate Harry's. Still, he was interested to learn what it was he truly feared in this world—pain caused to others. He thought he'd known that, but having a boggart turn into Sirius' love, dead, brought it home very nicely.

It froze him. He had no idea how to make this seem amusing enough to laugh.

"Who is that?" Remus asked with curiosity.

Harry didn't answer, but brought his fear of deep water to the forefront of his mind and made the boggart turn into a plummeting wave, ready to crash down on him and drown him.

"Riddikulus," he said sharply, and the wave lapped against the side of a plastic kiddie pool. He didn't laugh, but Remus did, surprised by Harry's ingenuity if nothing else. He didn't ask about the woman's identity again.

Together, they finished off the creature and then decided it was time to take a break. They'd been working around the desk all day, cleaning up the rest of the room, saving the rattling drawer for last. They were both a little sweaty and grimy, but feeling accomplished. The room was clear of Dark objects and the dark feeling that had so permeated every inch of the house when Harry and Sirius had moved in. Over the last month, it had slowly become habitable, and the lingering presence of the Black family had all but disappeared. They hadn't been able to get rid of Mrs. Black's horrible portrait in the entrance hall yet, but they were all cheerfully optimistic about it.

Cheerful optimism had been the name of the game all summer, and even more so now as the summer drew to a close. Summer drawing to a close was what had kept Sirius from joining them on their cleaning forays today—he was busy writing up lesson plans for all his classes this year. He'd been toying with it forever, but it was only

since their shopping trip to Diagon Alley that he'd gotten serious and sat down to prepare himself for his new job.

Harry didn't mind Sirius skipping the chores. It gave him more opportunities to use his new wand and get totally familiar with it. He hadn't realized the difference that having the right wand could make, until he had the right one. He honestly didn't know how he'd ever worked with the other one, after finding just how smoothly and beautifully his phoenix feather wand worked for him. Not that anyone, from himself to Dumbledore, was entirely thrilled that this particular wand should work so well, but it did make some sense. After all, he and Voldemort had been sharing thoughts, likely through whatever magic was in his scar, and now they had an actual blood link.

"Whew," Remus said, wiping his grimy brow. "This room's finished. At least it didn't have quite so many objects to keep Kreacher from pilfering."

"Maybe we cured him of that yesterday," Harry said thoughtfully. "He hasn't even tried to rescue anything from this room."

"I can't believe you gave him that locket. Wasn't Sirius angry?"

"Not really. I told Kreacher that since it was a valuable object, we didn't mind him keeping it, and we'd never try to take it away so long as he promised to stop collecting old trousers and dust bunnies."

"And he listened to you?"

"You haven't seen him today, have you?"

"You've got a point," Remus shrugged.

"Come on, let's clean up a bit and join Sirius downstairs," Harry suggested. "It's after noon, either he or Kreacher must have some lunch ready by now."

"I wouldn't count on it," Remus chuckled, but they split up to wash their hands and faces of the house's lingering grime—what had Kreacher been doing for years? was their frequent lament—and head

down to the kitchen for food to refuel them to do this again all afternoon.

They found Sirius reading the paper in front of a table laid out with sandwiches and fresh fruit. When they entered, he looked up and absently waved his wand over the table, pouring water into the waiting cups and making each plate in the stack of three shoot into position in front of a chair. Not to be outdone, Remus conjured up some napkins at each place. Harry cocked his head, thought for a moment, then with a smile cast a Chilling Charm on the glasses of water, which immediately began to sweat condensation. Situations like this had become almost routine recently, just for something more fun than housecleaning and a competition to keep them all sharp.

“So, what’re you reading?” Harry asked, seeing that Sirius was perusing the Daily Prophet he’d read first thing this morning.

“This article by . . . uh, Rita Skeeter, her name is. It’s awful, like a train wreck you can’t look away from.” Sirius shook his head, his face stern. “She’s an idiot.”

“She’s a cruel and raving mad wildebeest,” Harry said viciously.

Sirius looked up at Harry with surprise. Rarely did his godson offer up such colourful opinions about people.

“I haven’t read the article,” Remus said cautiously.

“It’s this thing about how Viktor Krum is banned from Britain for five years, but with no other punishment. He’s already graduated from school, so they can’t expel him—I think they could take his awards away, personally, and make him go back a year or two—and the Quidditch league in Bulgaria needs him too badly to kick him off, so they’re making it sound like the Granger girl had it coming for some reason. And this Skeeter bitch is totally on board, saying that Granger had all these delusions of grandeur and sly plots against Krum . . . it’s pathetic. The way they’ve carried on is just as much a crime as what Krum did. That girl didn’t do anything but be overwhelmed by an older man, and I don’t see how they could blame her for not knowing any better.”

Sirius and Remus were both giving him very queer looks, and he tried not to blush with embarrassment. Apparently, he had a soapbox.

"It's your fault," he told Sirius in a prim tone. "You introduced me to all those women when I was young. Maybe I take a looser view on women and sex, but at least I have some respect for them."

"I can't wait to watch grown men get lectured on how to treat women properly by a fifteen-year-old," Remus mumbled, taking a bite of his sandwich. "I haven't been to a good comedy in ages."

Harry shot him a glare, but he was flustered and decided he was going to keep his mouth shut from now on.

"Personally, I'm more interested to see what his fellow students think of him," Sirius said, grinning. "It's a good thing you don't need many friends."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not that weird."

Sirius coughed and cleared his throat and looked at Remus meaningfully, who was very carefully looking only at his sandwich.

"I'm not."

"You have a Penseive, Moony? I'll send you my memories of his first day."

"Much obliged, Padfoot."

Harry harrumphed, dispelling the awful nervous flutter in his stomach he always got when that subject came up. "I know you're trying to wind me up, but can we please not talk about it? Whatever happens, happens. Not worth worrying about."

"Can't I just get some kind of special certification so I can Apparate early? I don't want to take the train."

This said standing on the walk at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, getting ready to board. Maybe he'd left it a bit late for protests. But suddenly the idea of sharing a train compartment with a bunch of people he didn't know seemed daunting.

"Evan, don't start thinking you're more important than the rest of the students. Because you aren't."

"Gee, thanks, Dad, I didn't know. You get to Apparate."

"I'm of age."

"You're right about that," he replied slyly. "You sure you can find your way, an old fellow in his dotage like you?"

"I will get you for that later. Now come on, they're boarding, get your trunk and get on the train. I'll see you in a few hours."

Anyone unfamiliar was bound to attract a certain amount of attention, so there were many eyes watching the affectionate, teasing exchange between Professor John Rivers and his son Evan. It was their first look at the new teacher and the only transfer student at Hogwarts in ages. Obviously, the professor wasn't about to let his son take advantage of being an unusual student. He was going to ride the Hogwarts Express just like all the other kids.

As Harry boarded the train, he wasn't worried, despite the interested audience. They'd rehearsed their story until they could tell it in their sleep (which might be necessary in his case, sharing a room with other students, and all). They'd travelled some when Evan was young, but lived in Australia the majority of the time. John had been a teacher for years and Evan had gone to a Muggle school while having a wizard tutor (to account for his idiosyncratic knowledge of the Muggle world). The only thing the papers had reported was that the small family came to Hogwarts from Brisbane and that John had prior teaching experience, so people were likely to be ravenous for information. They'd spent the summer rehearsing loads of information that just happened to not be entirely true.

Once people had met them and realized they weren't all that exciting, Harry suspected the interest would dissipate. But for the first few days, he would likely have to answer the same questions a thousand times: what's Australia like? (That one, he could answer.) What did he think of coming to school after being privately tutored? (All too easy.) What did he think of all this business with You-Know-Who? (Slightly more problematic, but he could head off that one for at least a few weeks by saying he didn't know much about it.) He hoped the questions would run to more mundane subjects like his favourite hobby and his pets, or his brain would implode after the first week.

He chose a compartment at random, the first one empty that he came to. He'd passed a few filled with wide-eyed children who must be brand-new students, and carriages full of older students gossiping about their summers and so forth. He sat down, the newest edition of *Transfiguration Today* in his hands, and waited to see if anyone would join him. The train started moving, and he figured he was on his own, opening the periodical to an article he was interested in. He finished the article without interruption and moved on to another, then began hearing voices in the corridor outside. A few boys were talking out there, seeming like they were waiting for something. Harry kept his ears trained on them, but didn't consider it important, and his reading occupied most of his thoughts.

Not much later, the door slid open, and a boy stood outlined in the doorway. Harry lowered his magazine.

"Hello," he said politely.

The blond boy was sizing him up with calculating eyes, not yet speaking. Harry recognized a person who thought about people in terms of what they were worth and what use they could be to him. It was actually something of a relief to meet a student with such obvious motivations. There were a few other students gathered behind the blond, complaining that they'd been waiting out here all this time while he was with the prefects (which would explain the shining badge on his immaculate uniform robes), but he ignored them to focus on the occupant of what he had supposed to be an empty compartment.

“I’ve never seen you before,” the boy said slowly.

Well spotted, Harry thought sarcastically, but simply smiled.

“You wouldn’t have, I’m new around here.”

“You must be the new student from Australia. Your father is the new professor?”

“That’s right.”

The boy was again thinking hard, adding and subtracting, trying to decide what he was worth. Then suddenly, he straightened up from his pose in the door and stepped forward with a smooth smile. A politician.

“Since you’re unfamiliar with the school, I’d be happy to show you around. Introduce you to the right people, that kind of thing.”

The lazy drawl was perfectly disarming, and Harry was almost impressed. Almost. It was obvious he was full of himself, but he might be useful, at that. If nothing else, it would be interesting to see who this boy thought constituted the “right people” and what about the school he thought was worth showing. Sitting before him was his first opportunity to discover his allies and enemies at the school.

The blond boy was holding out a pale, long-fingered hand, ready to shake on the deal. Harry took it and shook it firmly. Harmless, anyway, I can ditch him if I have to.

“Evan Rivers. Nice to meet you.”

“Draco Malfoy. Mind if my friends and I share your compartment?”

Your cronies, you mean. Harry knew his type well enough.

“Sure, come on in.”

The others trooped in and sat. Harry, a.k.a. Evan, was introduced to Gregory Goyle, Vincent Crabbe, and Theodore Nott. It was maybe

five seconds after introductions were completed to the satisfaction of social niceties that Harry realized they were all from Slytherin House. He decided that it would be amusing to allow them to believe he would be Sorted tonight with the first year students, as they seemed to assume. He wondered what they'd do if he told them, oh-so-casually, that he had already secured a place in Gryffindor. All he did tell them was that he was just turned fifteen. It seemed they were all the same age.

He didn't even need Sirius'and Remus' stories to know just how relations were between the two houses. Malfoy made no attempt at disguising his disgust for members of Gryffindor, while the boys called Goyle and Crabbe just nodded and muttered sycophantically. The boy Theodore Nott sat in a strangely disconcerting silence, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with anything, interjecting no opinions of his own.

Malfoy—Draco, as the length of the train ride began to make first names comfortable—went on at some length about his dislike for Neville Longbottom, and the necessity of their little pact to appear congenial in public to keep his father happy. His new acquaintance had nothing to say on that subject (though he was observing Draco's attitude, and the way he kept looking at his friends for approval of his comments), so Draco moved on to less charged topics. Ron Weasley had been in the prefects' compartment with Parvati Patil, which was just annoying. He didn't know how that stupid ape had ever got to be a prefect, except he'd gotten awfully full of himself and started trying to make himself look like a good student when that idiot Professor Lupin had been around.

Here Harry offered his first contribution to the conversation in some time. "I thought Lupin was supposed to have been a good teacher."

"He was dirt-poor, and a lunatic in every sense of the word," Draco smirked—and again, looked around at the others, seeking their smirk in return. Harry was amused by this. The boy with the swagger was actually totally insecure, even if he'd never admit to it, and half these opinions he spouted probably weren't even his real feelings. "He was a werewolf; we're just lucky he didn't kill us all. Plus he was too stupid to ever figure out which one of his friends really betrayed the Potters."

He raised his eyebrow questioningly. "I suppose if you've been here all summer you have heard about the Ministry arresting that Pettigrew character and pardoning Sirius Black."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I read about it in the paper. My dad thought it was funny. He said to me, 'As much as we travelled when you were younger, we probably met him once! You don't remember talking to any little boys with black hair and spectacles, do you?' My dad makes pretty bad jokes, sometimes, you'll get used to it after a while."

Inside, Harry was laughing his head off at his fabrication, and wishing Sirius were listening in. Outwardly, he just offered a small smile that said aren't fathers annoying?

"Anyway, what were you saying was so bad about the prefect?"

"Oh, Weasley," Draco said, recalling his subject in a voice dripping with disdain. "When you take his sister into account, nothing wrong with him at all."

"What's wrong with her, then?"

"She's a holy terror. She's the Seeker on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, so they all love her, of course, but she's . . ." Here he seemed stumped to come up with an adequate description.

"She's scary," Crabbe grunted.

Goyle nodded his head.

Even Nott seemed to be in agreement on this one.

"When you meet her, you'll know what I mean," Draco promised.

Harry could have mentioned that he had met her, briefly, in the hospital wing at Hogwarts a few months ago, but he didn't. Best not to recall to anyone's mind the exact timing of his arrival in the country, unless it couldn't be helped. Of the student population, only the Weasleys would know he'd been here at the time of Voldemort's (still only alleged) resurrection. But he couldn't help thinking back on his

brief meeting with Ginny. He couldn't really form an opinion of her, not knowing her, and he recognized that his good feelings toward her were mostly because he was a hormonal teenaged boy reacting to the fact that she was pretty and played a sport he liked. Not the right way to go about things.

"So, tell me about your house," he said. "I don't know much about Slytherin."

Apparently, this was the perfect question. Draco seemed very eager to recruit Evan into his house, and described it in lavish detail. Harry found out where their common room was and how it was decorated, how much time they spent in it versus elsewhere. He got a mini biography of every major player in Slytherin House and how they got along with each other; their Head of House Mr. Severus Snape was treated to Draco's amateur psychological profiling skills. Harry was comfortably certain that he had a better grasp of that professor than Draco did, without even the benefit of having been his student for several years.

As this went on, Crabbe and Goyle grunted and nodded their agreements from time to time, seeming content with minor acknowledgements like puppies getting a pat on the head. Nott, however, worried Harry. He sat in the corner looking at Malfoy with malevolence, obviously trying to intimidate him into silence. Not that it worked, but it was obvious that Theodore Nott was both more intelligent and more cautious than Draco. He stayed quiet and didn't contradict him, which Harry assumed meant that Draco's father was more wealthy or influential than Theodore's, but the quiet boy was definitely harbouring feelings of superiority. Draco was a much better tool, Harry thought, then felt a strong sense of guilt. Here he was trying to find tools, not friends. He was not really approaching school the way he ought to. He should be trying to make friends, real friends. This thing with Voldemort wasn't supposed to take up his whole life.

He was just toying with the idea of admitting to them all that he was already selected for Gryffindor House when the train stopped. They must have arrived. They disembarked the train amidst a whirlwind of other teenagers and children trying to be the first to escape and shouting for friends they'd gotten separated from. A cluster of little

ones were huddled together on the platform looking desperately lost, and getting buffeted badly by the older students. Harry, a new student himself, felt a certain kinship with them. There was one small boy in particular, who clutched a large book to his chest while he was knocked about, as though its welfare was far more important than his own. When a burly older boy tried to slip past him through the crowd and caused him to fall without stopping to help, Harry hurried over. He held up his hand in a farewell wave to the Slytherin boys and helped the young boy to his feet.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah," the boy said, smiling like nothing had happened. "This is brilliant!"

Harry laughed and brushed dirt off the boy's shoulder. "There you are. Try not to get killed before you even get Sorted, okay?"

"Are we going to walk up to the school?" the boy asked him in a nervous, eager voice.

Harry tried to remember how it happened, what Sirius had told him. "Someone will come to collect you and you'll go across the lake," he said, trying to sound confident.

"Cool," the boy breathed, and looked up at him with worship in his eyes.

"Not me, though," Harry added uncomfortably, "I'm taking the carriages."

"First years!" a voice called over the din of several hundred people all talking to one another. "First years, this way please!" There was a woman with thick gray hair and carrying a lantern waving a hand over her head.

"I guess that's you," Harry drawled, sending the boy along with a gentle shove on his back. "Go on, good luck with your Sorting."

Then he hurried to catch up to the older students, who were making their way up a path from the train platform. It turned out that although Nott had slipped off somewhere, Draco and his two goons were waiting for him at the edge of the path.

“What was that all about?” Draco asked with disdain.

“I didn’t want the kids to get hurt,” Harry shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. Honestly, what did he care if Draco thought he was a dork? He wasn’t about to start changing the way he acted just to fit in better. He wasn’t all that interested in fitting in. If he was going to have relationships with the other students, they were going to be based on what kind of person he really was.

“All right, Evan,” Draco smirked, while Crabbe and Goyle were muffling laughter.

“What if he’s going to be in Slytherin?” Harry pointed out coolly. “You wouldn’t want one of your own housemates getting trampled to death before he’d even got inside the castle, would you?”

Still snickering, they clambered into a carriage that appeared to be pulled along by nothing at all. Since it would be enormously difficult to animate this many carriages, Harry decided it was likely being pulled by an animal he couldn’t see, rather than by a spell. He racked his brains for knowledge of invisible animals, but his mind kept going back to horses. It was a carriage, after all.

“Unicorns aren’t invisible,” he muttered, ruling out that possibility.

“Pardon?” Draco drawled, turning toward him.

“Nothing, I’m just trying to figure out what’s pulling the carriages.” He had to stop himself from saying that he couldn’t remember if Sirius had told him. There was no Sirius, and John Rivers wouldn’t know about Hogwarts traditions. Being Evan was going to be harder work than he had let himself believe. From the look on Draco’s face, he’d never really considered what was pulling him, and now he was surreptitiously sinking lower into his seat, looking shiftily back and

forth between the head of their carriage and the front of the one behind them.

Fine, you were right, Harry thought at Sirius, grumpily. I do need to get back to school. I don't know anything about magical creatures.

The carriage halted, the school loomed up above them, and then Draco's pale face was right in front of his, inquisitive.

"You're looking powerfully deep in thought."

"I was just trying to decide if it's fun or scary to travel in a vehicle when you don't know what's pulling it, and therefore have no assurance that it will arrive at its intended destination," Harry said, then blushed. He hadn't actually meant to say that aloud.

Draco looked surprised, but clapped him on the shoulder and grinned. "Come on. You're a strange one, Evan, but I think I like you."

Chapter Four

When Harry entered Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at the heels of Draco Malfoy, the other boy made the mistake—though perfectly understandable, still a mistake—of assuming that Harry had never been there before, for which Harry was enormously grateful. Draco's assumption made him start pointing out and explaining different aspects of the castle. Harry had never gotten a real tour, despite having been at the school three times now; he had entered the castle by Floo powder two of those times directly into the headmaster's office. The only path he was familiar with was the one that led from the office to the school infirmary. Therefore, Draco's mistake was his first chance to understand exactly where fate had brought him.

"Up there is the Astronomy Tower," Draco said, pointing as they trod the path to the door of the school. "Where we do our observation for the class. Do you like astronomy?"

"I love it."

"Right," he said, giving Harry a look that clearly said Draco considered him daft. "Okay, this is the main entrance, obviously, and there is the route you'd take to get down to the dungeons, where the Slytherin dormitory is and where you'll have Potions lessons."

Harry recognized the staircase that led down in the direction that Draco pointed; he remembered those wall sconces with the thick candles. He'd seen Snape climbing those stairs with a girl in his arms not so long ago. Remembering that night made him feel weak and shivery all over again, and he had to dispel the memory to get his vision to clear up—it had blurred with the power of the memory of his physical condition that night. He was able to hide it fairly well, forcing his body to keep walking. Draco didn't seem to notice his brief episode.

"And this is the Great Hall," Draco said simply, as the tidal wave of students swept them inside. Seeming to know the effect it would have, he gave Harry a moment to adjust.

The Great Hall was beautiful, hung all around with banners displaying the school crest and with the ceiling bespelled to display the myriad stars and velvety rich blue-black of the sky outside. There were long rows of tables laid out with sparkling cutlery and lit by hundreds, maybe thousands, of tall tapers. The candles were set in wall sconces, in candelabras on the tables, even suspended in midair amidst the enchanted stars of the high-vaulting ceiling. Harry was completely dazzled. He'd never been in a place so majestic or magical. This was what he'd been missing, when they'd decided to hide.

"This is where they serve all the meals, and if there's ever any kind of special assembly or event, it would be in here."

"Special event?" Harry asked dazedly, still looking around the room and realizing the four rows of tables were for the four houses. Why would they separate them at mealtimes? Weren't they separated often enough already?

"They picked the Tri-Wizard champions in here, and held the Yule Ball and everything."

"Ball? You have dances?"

"Just the one, during the tournament. Not most of the time," Draco reassured him.

"Damn," Harry said with a grin, "I was hoping there would be lots of opportunities for asking girls out."

Draco looked a little puzzled by that sentiment, but let it go. "Do you have to stay with the first years until you get Sorted?" he queried, already angling for the Slytherin table.

Harry realized no one had really discussed with him if he was supposed to hang out with the first years while they were sorted, or if he was supposed to sit with the Gryffindor students right away. He decided he didn't care. He'd wait for somebody to tell him.

"I don't think so," he said, and followed Draco, seating himself among the Slytherins, seeming to be without a care in the world. I am not feeling self-conscious, he told himself firmly. I am not following Draco around just because he's the only person I know. I'm tougher than that. Draco looked around at the other students with pride, as if to say, "See what I did? I got us the new guy!"

Who is he trying to impress? Harry thought, and looked at the students closest to them for possible candidates. There was a tall black boy, who was so handsome that he could have been a model; there were two girls, one large and brooding, one small and dark and continually maintaining an expression of distaste that made her look like a monkey; then there were Crabbe and Goyle (he'd totally forgotten their first names) and Theodore Nott. It's not any of them. At least, not any of them in particular. Maybe it's all of them . . . Does Draco want to be worshiped? It did make sense, in a way. If he was from the kind of wealthy and important family that Harry was beginning to suspect he was, then Draco was in the middle of trying to make himself a powerful leader like his father was. (Harry had heard plenty of his father's opinions on the train.)

They were calling for attention at the front of the room. Harry caught Sirius' eye from where he sat on the right-hand side of Dumbledore, who was naturally in the middle. He smiled innocently, even when Sirius gave him a stony expression that said he did not approve of Harry's seating arrangements. Sirius tapped the side of his head as subtly as he could, and Harry recognized the invitation to take a look. He carefully sent his mind in that direction, using Sirius' dark eyes as his focal point to centre in on his brain.

It would have been impossible for Harry to describe exactly what he did, or exactly what he saw. He didn't know how to explain the way he looked into a person's eyes until he could see behind the eyes, to the motivations for the emotions that he saw there. It was a failing on his part, he thought, that he needed eye contact to do it. He was a very amateur Legilimens, for all that he tried. He needed a proper teacher to ever be able to do it right. And it was still more difficult to explain what he found when he was able to touch what happened behind the eyes. It wasn't coherent thoughts; there were very few complete sentences and logical explanations lurking in a person's

brain. It was more that Harry was an interpreter of the images and sensations he found, that he was able to slowly bring colours and feelings into an order that made sense. And yet it took no time at all. It was an instant translation.

What Sirius was thinking was basically this: what do you think you are doing, Harry James Potter? It was coloured by annoyance, amusement, pride in his independence, and a lingering desire to beat him to a pulp for this stunt. That he was using Harry's full name was obvious from the stiff feeling of Sirius' image of him.

Harry shrugged in response, still smiling innocently. Making friends, he would have answered, if he'd been able to. For some inexplicable reason, he liked the pompous and manipulative blond boy he was seated with, if for no other reason than he was trying so hard to be a leader. But there was no time to try to reason it out right now, for Dumbledore was beginning to speak.

"Welcome, one and all," he said, smiling kindly, but with a voice of authority. "To our new students, we are glad to have you with us, and to those returning, we are glad to see you again. Before we begin with the sorting, I have an announcement. No doubt many of you are already aware that Professor Moody chose to resign at the end of term last year, and that we were looking for a new teacher to fill the gap left by that estimable man. I am pleased to announce that we have found someone, who has come to us all the way around the world from Australia to take up this position. Please welcome your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Rivers."

Sirius stood up briefly, waving a friendly hand to the sounds of polite applause. It was easy to see why the disguise would work, from this angle, Harry thought. Sirius didn't look a thing like the deranged convict in the newspapers, nor like the bright-eyed and thin-faced teenager who'd attended this school so long ago.

"Professor Rivers comes to us not only with teaching experience, but with his fifteen-year-old son, Evan Rivers, who is the first transfer student at Hogwarts in nineteen years. He will be joining us as a fifth-year student, and has promised to work very hard so that he may test for his OWLs this year. Please welcome him among you."

Harry was aghast, frozen on the spot. What was the headmaster thinking, calling the entire school's attention to him like this? They were all looking around, trying to find him. He stood up, trying to project an image of calm. Being seated at the Slytherin table, among a group of people who were rather unpleasant on the whole, was a lot more fun when Dumbledore wasn't pointing him out to the entire school.

"Evan, as we discussed a few weeks ago, you may now join your classmates at the table reserved for Gryffindor House," Dumbledore said, voice and manner kind as he gestured toward the students who were staring at him with a slightly hostile attitude. "I'm sure they will be happy to have such an interesting and well-travelled student among them," he said, smiling as though this went without saying.

Harry quickly made his way over to the Gryffindor table, trying to ignore the stunned and somewhat angry looks of the students both there and at the table he was vacating. He cast a quick glance at Draco and saw that the other boy hadn't even reached anger yet, he was still stuck on shock. He shrugged to say he hadn't known the protocol, and smiled, and waved a bit. That seemed to wake Draco up, which was maybe not a good thing. He offered Harry a rude hand gesture, and Harry hurried the rest of the way to the Gryffindors with his head down to avoid any more attention.

The good-natured Weasley twins waved at him enthusiastically, and even over the storm of muttering at all the tables, their happy exclamations about receiving him into their midst were clearly heard. Harry gratefully sat down at the table between them and a black boy with dreadlocks, who was making room for him by sliding down a bit.

"Budge up, would you?" he said to the girl next to him, pushing her down the bench, then turned back to Harry. "Nice to have you, Evan. Lee Jordan."

Harry shook the older boy's hand, then turned to the Weasley twins. "Thanks."

“Anything we can do for a fellow Gryffindor,” one of them said off-handedly.

“Kind of rotten of the old codger not to tell you where to sit ahead of time, anyway,” the other one added.

“You sure you’re a Gryffindor?” the first one asked with suspicion when Harry risked another glance back at the Slytherin table to see they were pointedly ignoring his existence already.

“That’s what the Hat said,” Harry sighed. Even if I did kind of force it to say so.

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” Lee Jordan said.

“Speaking of the hat . . .” the second twin said, nodding toward the front.

The first years were queuing up for their Sorting. They listened politely and quietly to the Hat’s song, which the twins assured him was a tradition, and which Harry regarded as strangely profound. He was beginning to really like the Sorting Hat, his memory of it’s sneering contempt for his own pride mingled with its obvious loyalty to the school and to encouraging cooperation between all the houses. The new students were divided up in a very orderly fashion, speaking to centuries of procedure. Harry recognized the boy with the thick book whom he’d protected down by the train, whose name was revealed to be Liam Crew and who gave him a cheery wave before he scurried off to the Hufflepuff table. Harry waved back. Liam was subjected to instant interrogation by the other Hufflepuff students, no doubt about how he knew that weird Evan Rivers person. Well, at least their impression of him would be a good one, Harry thought. He didn’t know how the Gryffindors were going to accept him, other than these three boys. He really shouldn’t take such a sick pleasure from disturbing the status quo, it was getting him into all sorts of trouble. Still, he couldn’t help feeling a certain pride in how much he’d managed to upset everyone just by sitting at the wrong table. Tradition was one thing, stubborn unwillingness to believe anything good about another house was something else.

Then Dumbledore stood back up.

“Before we begin our feast, I have a few thoughts I’d like to share with you all,” he said, looking far more solemn than he had a few minutes ago. Harry thought he knew what this was about. He was right. “No doubt many of you have been hearing the rumours of the return of a Dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort. It is almost impossible that you have not, since the subject has been so popular in the news and in the tavern gossip all summer. I have no wish to cause divisions among the students, so I will simply urge caution to all. Whether or not he has indeed regained an able body, there can be no doubt that his followers and the ideals he espouses continue to be dangerous and ugly. I would ask that each student carefully examine what he or she believes, and try to avoid association with those who would seek to destroy the beautiful society we share. Continue to enjoy your friends, your studies, and being the wizards and witches who will shape our future.

“With that said, I hope you will all have a wonderful experience at Hogwarts this year. Let us begin that experience with what I am sure will be a most excellent feast. Dig in!” he finished with a smile and wave of his hands.

Food blossomed in front of the students, and Harry was stunned by display. Knowing as he did that food could not be Transfigured, he surmised that this immense feast must have taken days and even weeks of preparation. He served up with relish and found to his delight that the food was delicious, but he couldn’t help wondering who had prepared it. Did Hogwarts have servants? If so, they must be one of the largest employers in magical Britain, outside of the Ministry of Magic.

While he ate, he was introduced to the girls that were sitting with the Weasley boys and Lee. They were Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell, and together with the twins and their younger sister Ginny, they were the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry was informed that their Keeper and Captain, Oliver Wood, had graduated last year, leaving Angelina in charge and needing to find a new Keeper.

“You don’t play Quidditch, do you?” she asked Harry hopefully.

Harry nodded eagerly, his mouth full of potatoes. He swallowed, painfully, eager to answer. "I do, but I wouldn't make much of a Keeper. I like to really fly, you know, in a position where I can move around a little more." He shrugged. "But I know you guys are set for those positions. I've never actually tried playing Keeper before, it might be fun."

"You might as well try out," Angelina said, looking a little disappointed. "Shall I let you know when I hold trials?"

"Sure," Harry said. He didn't really want to be a Keeper, but the chance to be on the Gryffindor team was too good to pass up.

He was in the middle of another bite of potatoes when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around to see the younger Weasley brother, the tall and thin one, standing behind him. Oh, yes, the prefect that Draco had such a dislike for. Maybe. If Draco had been even remotely honest with his feelings, instead of inventing things he thought his friends would want to hear or regurgitating his father's opinions of the other boy's father.

"Hello," he said cautiously.

"Hello," the red-haired boy replied. "I'm Ron Weasley."

"Yes, I remember you."

"Oh, right," Ron said, looking a bit embarrassed. They had seen each other in the hospital wing when Ginny had gotten burned. "Well, anyway, I've been told you're going to be in a room with me and my mates, so I wanted to bring you over and introduce you. Me and Parvati will be showing the first years the way to Gryffindor Tower after the feast is over, so I can show you our room then, if you want."

"Yeah, sure," Harry answered. He picked up his plate, not willing to abandon his meal. "It was nice to meet you all," he addressed Lee and the girls. "Thanks again," he muttered, giving each twin a brief pat on the shoulder, and then he followed Ron down the row to where the younger students were sitting. He felt eyes on him, but with the

feast going on and conversations among the students, he felt a little more comfortably anonymous, just one more student moving around to talk to friends and fellow students.

“Everyone, meet Evan,” Ron said loudly, and gestured to an empty place on the bench. “Here, you can sit down.” Harry did. “This is Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, and there’s Neville Longbottom, you’ll be sharing a room with all four of us.”

Harry nodded to the boys, and allowed his eyes to linger on Neville Longbottom for a moment. He looked . . . awkward. It was indefinable just what made that impression. He was sort of soft-looking, but it wasn't that. He seemed a little clumsy, he knocked over his goblet when he saw Harry looking at him, but he stopped it from spilling with a quick spell and righted it again. It was just how he tried to be invisible, Harry decided. He didn't want anyone to notice him. He wore boring colours, he never looked up at anyone or tried to talk to them. But it was impossible for the (other) Boy-Who-Lived, the famous survivor of Lord Voldemort, to go truly unnoticed, so his attempts made him look strange and awkward.

Harry felt overwhelming sympathy for Neville. He had never felt such a strong desire to help someone, such an instant wish that someone's life could have been different. It was his fault to some degree; his and Sirius' actions had led to Neville's current misery. Pettigrew's attempted kidnapping that revealed how pointless the direction of Neville's life was, that was just icing on the cake. Harry thought Neville had been miserable for a long time before then. Now he seemed like he was not really a person. Like he was a shadow of a person, somehow left over when the actual person had moved instead of following like a shadow should. Neville was an impression of the boy he should have been, rather than the boy himself.

Harry had briefly met his eyes, had taken a quick look inside Neville, and so he knew his view of the other boy was correct. Neville didn't exactly see himself that way, though his self-identity was similar to this shadow idea, but his brain made it clear that he was aware of how he looked to others. He was simply too depressed to do anything about it. Crushed underneath the weight of disappointment, he seemed to have lost the ability to change anything he didn't like.

Harry could see now why Dumbledore got such a sad look when he had mentioned Neville to Harry in the past. Dumbledore felt responsible for this. And he was, but to be fair, he had never meant for things to end this way. Harry was perfectly assured that Dumbledore had honestly believed Harry was dead and Neville was the subject of the prophecy.

It wasn't over yet, Harry determined. Not by a long shot. Maybe he was the only person who could help Neville. So he would. He would do something. Bring Neville to life, if he could.

He finally shook off his reverie and turned his attention back to Ron.

"And these are some of the girls," Ron said, giving Harry a puzzled look over his long silence. "Parvati Patil, she's the other prefect."

"Hello," she said brightly. "Nice to meet you, Evan. This is my friend Lavender, Lavender Brown."

"Hi," he said, smiling warmly. "It's nice to meet you, as well, Miss Parvati, Miss Lavender." This was an affectation he'd developed when he was ten and meeting lots of interesting women with no last names. Ever since then, women had seemed like the way he said their names and he saw no reason to stop.

They giggled, and ducked their heads toward one another, obviously retreating into private conversation. Harry politely did not listen, but he did catch, "Isn't he cute?" from Lavender.

"And that's Hermione Granger," Ron said, his voice low and embarrassed. His ears were turning a little bit red.

Harry's attention was instantly focused. It was her. The girl from that night, the girl Snape had carried, the girl who had been so brutalized by Viktor Krum. Her wealth of hair, that wild brown cascade he remembered, was pinned up behind her head, as if to hide it. Her face was serious and pale. She was pretty when she wasn't covered in blood, Harry decided. But sad. She was so terribly sad. She looked up at him.

"It's nice to meet you, Evan," she said in a small, lost voice. Then she looked away again.

She was stirring the food around without eating, her eyes focused on a book propped up against an empty goblet. She didn't interact with anyone. She wasn't like Neville, pretending to himself that he didn't exist. She wasn't hiding, she was just trying to move through the world as though it couldn't touch her. Like she was alone here. And maybe she was, Harry thought. She'd been through something that none of the other students had, something they couldn't understand. She had a reason to feel alone, and a reason to wish to be. If she were alone, no one could possibly be there who would want to hurt her.

"Likewise, Miss Hermione," Harry said, polite but impersonal. "May I ask what you're reading?"

She seemed surprised that their conversation wasn't over. She looked up with frightened eyes. "It's a book, well, a series of articles, I suppose, it's a collection of writings on spell creation theories."

"Spell creation? Inventing your own spells, you mean?"

"Well, yes," she said, still nearly whispering. "It's mostly about the theory behind it, and the purpose of it, rather than instructions on how to do it."

Harry gave her an encouraging smile. "It sounds fascinating. Would you mind if I borrowed it when you're finished?"

Now they were all staring at him. What? It was an interesting subject, wasn't it?

"Um," she whispered, raising her hand to smooth an imaginary wisp of hair away, mostly to hide her flushed face. "Yes, I suppose so."

Then she ducked her head behind the book and stirred her food forcefully. Harry gave up, let her retreat into her comfortable, silent space where no one was touching her, not even with their voice. For now. He'd try again.

When dessert appeared, so did the ghosts. Harry had been enjoying a treacle pudding and trying not to be obvious about watching Ginny Weasley, when someone's transparent head poked up through it. He jumped out of his seat and dropped into a fighting crouch with one hand on the pocket of his new robes where lay his new wand. Then the ghost rose majestically up through the table, revealing his full body, and Harry relaxed, standing up straight. He wasn't ready to sit back down yet, not after his brief personal experience with ghosts.

"Hello," the ghost called out to everyone, looking cheerful—and maybe just a bit pleased at Harry's reaction. "Wonderful to see you all again!" he declaimed, his enthusiasm making his head wobble a bit underneath the thick ruffled collar he wore. Harry was afraid his head would drop off, but it didn't. "Did I frighten you?" he asked Harry, sounding eager.

They were all laughing at him, Ginny was right there down the row and she looked like she would cry with laughter, but Harry just faced the ghost with a stony expression and ignored the other students.

"Yes, you did. But that's all right. I'm Evan."

"Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington," the ghost declared importantly. "Most famous of the Gryffindor ghosts."

"It's lovely to meet you, Sir Nicholas, but I have a favour to ask you. If you wouldn't mind, next time you drop in, not showing up in my food? Please?"

The misty apparition gave him a dignified nod, which loosed his head a bit and made Harry grimace. "At your service," he said, and glided away to where the twins were calling out a greeting down the table.

Harry sat down with a smile for his new roommates. "Do they always show up like that?"

"That's just Nearly Headless Nick," Seamus scoffed. "He's always trying to get someone to scream, but he never manages. I don't think he'd know what to do if he actually did scare someone."

"Scared the hell out of me," Harry declared, looking mournfully at the dessert he was no longer interested in. "But I've only seen one ghost before, and he was really horrible."

"Wait until you see the Bloody Baron," Ron muttered darkly. "The Slytherin ghost."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw the ghost in question. Silver blood splattered the front of his robes and his face was strangely expressionless. Harry fought goosebumps, but he didn't think the staff would allow the presence of a ghost who was truly dangerous. He turned back to the other boys and shrugged.

"Pretty bad, but not as scary as the one in Peru."

"You were in Peru?" Dean blurted out. A few seats down, Ginny and her girlfriends were perking up to hear.

Harry shrugged modestly, not wanting to act boastful in front of her, or his roommates. "Just for a holiday, you know. We went to Machu Picchu. There was this native warrior who just followed me around and stared at me like he wanted to kill me. I think he hated everyone, but he knew I could see him." He shuddered at the memory. "I've never seen any other ghosts, though. It seems like you have a lot of them around here."

"It's like me mam always says when she puts me on the train," Seamus said. "Magic's a dangerous business, so don't go getting yourself killed this year! I expect most of the ghosts got killed doing something dangerous around the school."

"Dangerous at school?"

"There's all kinds of things that could happen," Ron spoke up. "There was that basilisk, although luckily it didn't kill anyone. And a potion could go really badly wrong sometime, or you could have a Quidditch accident, or something. Magic can be pretty dangerous. But you know that, right, Evan?"

“Well, yeah,” Harry said slowly. “I just thought, since it’s a school . . .” The idea that Hogwarts could be dangerous was only just now occurring to him, and it was a pleasurable idea. He had avoided school for a reason. It was always so boring. Maybe he wouldn’t be bored here, though he’d expected to be. With the prospect of being on the Quidditch team, and with the idea that there could be a fatal accident, school was suddenly looking like a lot more fun.

Parvati leaned over the table to get Ron’s attention. “Come on, it’s about time to show the first years off to the dormitories.”

“Oh, yeah, I reckon,” Ron said, sounding uncomfortable. He wasn’t used to this prefect thing yet, Harry thought. But he stood up, ready to carry out his duty anyway. Harry thought he could like Ron, if he was a person like that. “All right, snotbags, listen up!” he shouted, marching his way over to the cluster of wide-eyed children. “I’m Ron Weasley, this is Parvati Patil, and we’re your prefects. We’re going to show you how to get to Gryffindor Tower, and you’d better not forget, because I’m not going to show you twice!”

His joking manner seemed to soothe the frightened nerves of the little ones, who laughed at him as they stood up to follow. He turned around and caught Harry’s eye.

“Coming, Evan?”

Harry cast a glance over at the Slytherin table to see that Draco had yet to step into his role as prefect for the new Slytherin students. He’d better go talk to him while he had the opportunity.

“Naw, go on. I’ll figure it out. Thanks, anyway.”

Ron and Parvati herded the young students out of the Great Hall while Harry made his way across it. The trip felt shorter and less conspicuous the second time, but he didn’t feel much better this time. He could feel Ginny watching him, the pretty girl with the red hair and the brothers he liked. And here he was going back to the table with whom their house supposedly had such a rivalry.

It made him feel rebellious, and he hated the whole idea. Whose idea was this, anyway? What made them all act like this?

“Draco,” he said, getting the boy’s attention as he approached.

Draco gave him a cold look and stood up. “I’m sure you’ve got a fascinating explanation, but I’m afraid it will have to wait. I’m a prefect, I have duties to perform.”

“Cram it up your hole,” Harry said harshly. “I thought we were going to be friends.”

“You could have told me you’d already been Sorted.”

“I might have, but I thought you wouldn’t talk to me if I did.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t have.”

“You’re talking to me now, aren’t you?”

“You came over here, Rivers.”

“What happened to Evan? I thought you liked me.”

“I didn’t know you were Gryffindor. What do you think I should put in the letter home? ‘I spent the whole train ride with the new student and thought he would be a great Slytherin, and then it turned out he’d been in Gryffindor the whole time and lied to me. But don’t worry, your idiot son will try to pass his exams, at least.’ Leave me alone, Rivers.”

“I didn’t tell you because you didn’t ask, okay?”

“It was still a lie.”

“Obviously you weren’t actually looking to make friends with me, you were just trying to figure out if you could use me,” Harry said, his hands balled into fists, his face red with embarrassment at having half the school watching them. Or maybe it was shame at accusing Draco of something he’d been doing himself just a few hours ago. But that

wasn't what he was here for, and Draco's attitude made him feel angry and hurt. He'd honestly thought he was finding a friend, and he hadn't had a real friend his own age ever in his life. He'd never let himself think he would have one, and now his first effort was going badly wrong.

"I don't get what this house division is for, anyway. I understand that you'd want to spend time with people that are like you, and that's fine. But where is the rule that says you can't talk to people in other houses? Is there some kind of code that says I couldn't get along with you, if I wanted to? I get there's a rivalry between our houses, okay. I understand that. But this is stupid. It doesn't make any sense. I didn't even know that we were supposed to be enemies until an hour ago, so why would you think I was intentionally trying to mislead you?"

Harry grabbed Draco's arm and yanked him away from the other students, away from the tables to where they couldn't be overheard quite so easily.

"I know you think you're in charge of Slytherin or something. I know you want to be their leader. And that's great. Good for you. But you know what a leader does? He trusts himself and his own ideas, he doesn't just stick to the accepted traditions like everyone else. If you want them to look up to you, you have to make your own decisions. You're just going along with what everyone else thinks, trying to be the best at following the same boring ideas that everyone else has had for years. If you want them to respect you, try thinking for yourself. I can see you work hard, and that you have a lot of determination, and that you're intelligent. I was ready to be friends with you. I don't know what you saw in me, but I thought you were ready to be my friend, too. I haven't had a lot of friends in my life, so that means something to me, and I can't stomach the idea of letting it go just because someone else said we're supposed to be enemies. Do you have enough room in that shrivelled little heart of yours to have a friend, Draco? Do you?"

Draco just gaped at him. Harry was still gripping a fistful of the other boy's robes, and was ready to punch his lights out if the answer was no. He was angry enough to use violence, something he'd been trained not to do, had sworn to a code that said he wouldn't. He was

starting to think he'd been right to keep his distance from his classmates all these years, to pretend to be an adult and keep his personal space. His reaction was ridiculous, irrational, and he couldn't help it. His feelings were hurt.

He let go of Draco, threw the silent boy off in disgust. "Fine. I hope you figure it out before it's too late for you to have any friends at all."

Draco finally spoke when he was turning away.

"You really think that?"

"Think what?"

"What you just said. After seeing the way everyone looked at you, the way your own housemates were staring at you, you still want to make friends with a Slytherin?"

"I thought I did." Then Harry gave away his anxiety. He bit his lip. It made the fear of rejection underneath his anger peek out, and he instantly hated himself for it.

"And you really think that turning my back on the traditions of my house is going to make them respect me?"

"I don't know. I just know that if it were me, I couldn't respect myself if my only reasons for doing something were what everyone else would think."

Draco stared at him some more. Then, he nodded, faintly. He slid away from Harry, back toward the table where his housemates were whispering to one another and trying to guess what their heated conversation was about.

"I'll see you, Evan."

Harry smiled at this small victory as he went back to Dean, Seamus, and Neville and inquired if they would show him around. He didn't answer their questions about what he'd been doing. He needed some time to think over what he was doing. He was supposed to be acting

inconspicuous, like he was just another student, and here he was trying to topple centuries of tradition just by forcing someone to be nice to him. It was not an auspicious beginning to his year of trying to be like everyone else.

Maybe it wasn't possible for him to be like everyone else. He had never been very good at it.

This can't end well . . .

Chapter Five

Harry carefully applied a bit of makeup to his scar. He'd done this so often he could do it in the dark now—which was handy, because that's what he was doing. Then he finger-combed his shaggy hair over his forehead. He'd rather have actually combed it, but he couldn't jump out of bed with his hair already combed, could he? Not that anyone would be likely to notice, he grouched, feeling the way it stubbornly persisted in sticking up in the back. He didn't have to worry about his contact lenses, at least. Those he slept in and changed only once a week. Sirius was keeping them in his room, so no one could find them in Harry's possessions.

Finally, feeling certain his forehead was well-protected, he opened the curtains around his bed. He'd said goodnight to his roommates and closed the curtains with finality last night, and he hoped they'd get the idea that he liked his privacy, when he could get it. He was sure that privacy was going to be hard to come by from now on. While he slept, he was more vulnerable to discovery, and he hoped his roommates would respect the curtains.

Clambering out of bed, he took stock of the room, squinting past the eyeball-stabbing morning sunlight. He was so not a morning person. Seamus and Ron were still asleep, Seamus with most of his body hanging off the bed and really anchored only by the twisted sheets, and Ron with his mouth wide open but miraculously not snoring. Dean was rummaging in his trunk for something, and Neville was nowhere in sight.

"Morning," Dean said, his eyes still little more than slits, open just enough that he didn't crash into things.

"Lo," Harry yawned. He hadn't been able to sleep very well last night, little wonder after his stunt. He'd shut the curtains in part just to stop the others asking what he had to do with the Slytherins. They didn't seem to be suspicious, though, just curious, so he was hoping he hadn't sabotaged his chances with his own house. "Where's Neville?"

Dean shrugged. “Dunno. Probably in the shower, which is where I’m headed.” He located what he’d been looking for in his trunk—a toothbrush and toothpaste—and headed out.

Harry had taken his last night, seen how empty the bathrooms were at that hour, and considered showering at night from now on. He was going to have a lot of trouble adjusting his internal clock to this whole waking in the morning, going to bed at night thing. When was he supposed to be able to transform? He’d gotten good at finding and catching mice and other small creatures as an owl, and he was going to miss the hunt.

His stomach growled just thinking about food, and he realized there was one really great advantage to showering at night: you could get to breakfast that much sooner. He hurried to brush his teeth and made a sad attempt at combing his hair, and finally donned the robes he was already learning to detest (were jeans really such a bad thing?), making sure to tuck his wand into the inner pocket so he could feel it against his chest while he walked.

He felt rather lazy this morning, he realized as he headed down the stairs, gripping the side rails tightly in case they moved again like they had last night. Indeed they did, and he braced his knees, riding it out and feeling a thrill in the centre of his hungry belly. He’d never lived amongst so much magic all at once before. Even when they were living with other wizards, the world was full of such simple things like household charms and Floo stations, whereas Hogwarts was an intense experience. The stairs deposited him in an unfamiliar location, but by looking over the edge of the balcony, he could see his intended destination on the bottom floor, and cautiously picked out a path. But the fuzzy state continued, his head and eyes heavy. He normally wouldn’t have been awake for hours yet. And today, there were all sorts of classes to attend and things to become familiar with. When was he going to have time to practice flying, or jiu jitsu, for that matter?

From now on, he was going to have to get up early, he realized, and actually groaned aloud. His groan echoed off the walls, and he scurried down the next staircase with embarrassment, hoping nobody else meandering their way down would realize it had been him. No

privacy anywhere in this school. If he wanted to exercise, he would have to do it before breakfast, because the rest of the day was going to be filled up with classes and homework and attempts to figure this place out. Not to mention trying to figure out how to surmount his main obstacle in life, he reminded himself. How to stop Voldemort. He wondered how long Voldemort would let him stay in hiding.

He allowed those worries to fall into the back of his mind for a while when he entered the Great Hall and was greeted by the students who had met him last night and didn't seem to think he was some kind of Slytherin spy.

"Good morning, Evan," Katie Bell chirped. She, apparently, actually liked it when dawn arrived. He tried to smile back despite feeling like a lazy arse for not flying, not exercising, not starting his day with a brisk potions experiment, or anything.

"All right, Evan?" Lee Jordan added solicitously before returning to his cereal and toast.

He saw, to his delight, coffee, and got himself a cup quickly. He sat down at a randomly selected place at the table, hunched over his cup, and inhaled gratefully. He took his first careful sip and found it just a touch too hot to drink yet. He looked up, intent on finding food, and saw across the table three girls looking at him with fascination. One of them was Ginny Weasley.

"Morning, ladies," he mumbled, reaching out for a pile of eggs. Good enough to start with.

"Hello," the other two tittered.

Ginny didn't titter. Her eyes locked on his warmly. "It's nice to finally see you again, Evan" she said with confidence.

Harry was intrigued right away. From the attitude of the other girls, they were sort of "discovering" boys right now, but Ginny wasn't uncomfortable in the least.

"Yeah, same here," he said with a smile, taking a look around and discovering the toast further down the table. Before he could get up for it, Ginny slid it his way. He quickly assembled a sandwich of scrambled eggs and toast and bit in happily, while the two girls giggled and nibbled on food, and Ginny watched him with a questioning look in her eyes.

"Your hair got very long over the summer," she remarked.

"Oh, yeah," he mumbled through his food, shrugging for her benefit. "Going through a rebellious phase or something."

"Your eyes are . . ." She stopped.

Harry's heart skipped a beat. She remembered. Not good.

"Brown?" he suggested helpfully, when she didn't continue.

"Yeah," she said, frowning but seeming to give up. Harry drank his coffee in the best leisurely fashion he could muster up, pulse thudding in his ears as he waited. "Was your summer all right?" she asked politely.

"A little boring," he answered, relaxing. She'd bought it. "We don't know anyone here yet. But I did go out to get my school supplies, and that was really fun."

"Word is that your dad is friends with one of our old Defense teachers, Professor Lupin."

"Oh, sort of," Harry said, swallowing another bite of his breakfast. God, these people notice everything, don't they? "I guess the headmaster is still friendly with the professor, and asked him to welcome me and my dad to England, and tell my dad about the school. He decided to show us around Diagon Alley."

"It must be nice to finally be here where you can meet some people your own age," Katie Bell said, obviously having been listening in from down the table. "I would have been so bored, being alone all summer."

Harry drank more coffee, and finally began to feel alive. "I wrote to a few people from back home, but, yeah, I'm glad to be here." Actually, I spent three weeks trying to finish that letter to Anna telling her that I needed to find some happiness in my new home and I wouldn't be writing anymore and feeling like an absolute bastard . . .

"So, here's the big question," said a male voice behind him, and then he suddenly found himself shoved over to the side by a nudging body. Lee was also pushed down the other direction.

"It's what we've all been dying to ask you since last night," said an identical voice, to go with the identical face.

Guess they're morning people, too. I really need to find some way to tell them apart.

"It's your father, see."

"Everybody wants to know . . ."

Suddenly, both boys fluttered their eyelashes and clasped their hands under their chins, and said in identical sighing voices,

"Is he single?"

Harry burst out laughing. He couldn't miss the way Ginny and her friends, and even Katie, perked up at the question, and that just made him laugh harder. Okay, he was a handsome guy, but it was just Sirius, honestly, they had no idea what they'd be getting themselves into . . .

"Actually, we just wanted to know if he's a good teacher," Katie said, her face lit up with just a tinge of red.

"Yes. To both questions. But he doesn't usually go for thirteen-year-olds, so my advice is to focus on the coursework. Dad's already been teaching for a while, and he's got, y'know, life experience. He's worth learning from."

“Last year, Professor Moody taught us all sorts of things nobody else would dare,” Ginny said with challenge. “You can’t get much more experience than a retired Auror who filled half the cells in Azkaban.”

“Likely not,” Harry agreed. “Never said Dad was the best, just that he’s good.”

“I’ll bet he never battled Death Eaters in person.”

Harry very carefully did not open his mouth.

“He’ll be better than Lockhart, anyway,” one of the twins commented, shooting his sister a very stern look.

Grateful for the opening, Harry asked, “Who’s Lockhart?” and let them scramble over each other to be the one to explain their previous professor. Then he picked up his coffee again, feeling slightly disgruntled. It had been going fine until Ginny started acting like she knew everything.

Neville appeared, ghost-like, in the middle of a tale about Lockhart and some pixies. He didn’t speak to any of them, he just snatched a bowl of cereal and started to retreat toward the end of the table.

“Morning, Neville,” Harry called out to him. “They’re all telling me about one of your old professors, Lockhart. What did you think of him?”

Neville froze, looked around, then sank down at the table directly across from him, seeming to realize there was no way out.

“He didn’t seem to know much,” he answered in a soft voice. That seemed to be the entirety of his opinions.

“What about all those books he published?” Harry prompted.

“I think he made most of it up,” Neville answered, finally daring to look at Harry for a moment. “My Gran thinks he’s a big bag of hot air. I didn’t learn very much from him.” Then he dropped his eyes into his

cereal. After a few mouthfuls and a minute of stirring, he pushed it away and got up from the table and left.

Harry frowned. "Does he always do that?"

"Yes," Ginny answered. "He didn't used to be like that. He was always a little bit aloof, but he was much more confident before. Well, no one likes to find out they've been lied to since they were kids, do they? After that news about Peter Pettigrew . . . I used to be friends with him, you know. We talked, at least."

"Not anymore?"

Ginny shrugged. "You see what he's like."

I see he needs you more than he ever did before, Harry thought at her, scowling into his coffee so she couldn't see his expression. Real friends didn't give up like that. At least he didn't think they should, but what did he know?

"I'm going to get ready for class now," he said, getting up. "I'll see you all tonight."

"Good luck with your first day, Evan," Ginny said, acting cheerfully oblivious about his abrupt departure.

"Yeah, see you," the others echoed one another.

As he exited the Great Hall, he ran into Draco coming in. He paused, wondering if the other boy had sorted out what he planned to do.

"You look like you're in a rotten mood," Draco remarked. He looked uncertain.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean about Ginny Weasley," Harry said.

Unexpectedly, Draco smiled. "That didn't take long."

"Maybe she's better when you get to know her."

Draco gave him a wide-eyed look. "Uh, yeah, if you survive the experience."

"She can't be any harder to be friends with than other people around here." Harry crossed his arms and gave the other boy a pointed look.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Great Merlin, you win, Rivers. I am willing to test your theory about gaining respect by acting outside the norm. We share a Potions class later, I'll see you then."

"Good," Harry said, and headed back to the tower to collect his school bag and supplies for the day. There, that was one problem at least partially solved, and he did like his housemates so far. Maybe this wasn't going to be a complete disaster.

All in all, it was a relief to get out the History of Magic classroom and head downstairs for double Potions. Dealing with a professor who held grudges had to be better than dealing with a professor who was dead. The entire history of magic! Harry had been thrilled to see it on his schedule, then realized he'd already read the required textbook. Then he'd actually heard Professor Binns lecture, and it was ghastly. He resigned himself to hating Monday and Thursday mornings and trying to find a way to make electronics work within the Hogwarts grounds so he could record Binns and sleep through the lectures.

Whether Mondays and Thursdays would improve before lunch remained to be seen, as he had not yet had Potions. He headed down to the dungeons with the other Gryffindor students who had been in the history class with him, looking around with frank interest at this part of the castle he had not yet seen. He wondered if Draco would show him around down here.

He nearly laughed aloud when he entered the Potions room. Having it in the dungeons was probably practical, since no one wanted exploding potions all over the rest of the school. But the dank feel to the corridor could be changed easily, and the sort of shadowy feel to the interior of the room was all affectation. He hadn't counted on Professor Snape being such a theatrical man. He supposed Snape would rush into the room with his robes billowing around him dramatically, and he hoped he wouldn't laugh if Snape actually did.

He sat down directly in the centre of the room and waited. Some of the other Gryffindor boys sat down on his right, and the Gryffindor students filled out the right side of the room, but the left remained vacant until the Slytherin students began to trickle in. They left a wide berth around Harry, filling in the edges and corners, then the front and back of the room. Harry was amused. Apparently, having deceived them by sitting at their table meant he had some catching disease.

Then Draco strolled in with Crabbe and Goyle, looking perfectly nonchalant, saying something that made the two larger boys flanking him laugh. Cool and smooth, he slid into the seat beside Harry and dropped his bag on the floor. The room got very quiet for a moment.

"Hello," he said calmly, and reached into the bag for a quill.

"Hey," Harry returned, making similar motions to get parchment and quill ready for notetaking. He had a very nice wooden case for his potions ingredients which he left in his bag, not certain that it would be needed on the first day. He grumbled a bit over the quill, since he was far more used to ballpoint pens. "Don't know why we have to use these stupid things," he muttered.

Draco had been surveying the rest of the students with a majestic air, like a king overlooking his kingdom. It was obvious that any and all emotions he may be feeling about this "experiment" were being suppressed until he was in a more private setting. He was planning to test this theory absolutely, with no hemming or hawing about it. He turned at Harry's mutterings and looked at his pen.

"Well, no wonder, Rivers, look at this! You've no idea how to cut a quill, do you?"

"No," Harry said darkly, giving his pen a murderous look. It had given him trouble all the way through his classes, and his notes looked like they'd been attacked by a dangerous ink beast, if there was such a thing. He supposed it was possible.

“Give it here,” Draco sighed, holding out his hand. Harry thrust the pen to him, which he received calmly. He drew a small silver knife from his bag that looked like part of his potions kit—probably real silver, not just silver plating like most of the supplies sold in the shop at Diagon Alley, Harry thought—and put it to the edge of the pen. “You have to cut it at a sharper angle so the ink—Hey, Evan, pay attention, I’m not doing this for you again—so the ink comes out on a finer point. There. That should do it.”

“Thank you,” Harry said in a false, chirpy tone, still glaring at his pen. Then his mood abruptly changed when he saw Draco look around to see who had noticed this little bit of friendly action, like he was daring them to say something about it. It amused him, and he opened his mouth to tease Draco about it.

Professor Snape swept into the room with his robes billowing out behind him. Harry couldn’t close his mouth in time.

He laughed. Loudly. While the rest of the room had fallen into absolute silence.

Snape spun around with the black cloth swirling at his ankles and his eyes went to Harry straight away. Harry immediately clamped his mouth shut and thought fast. The professor knew his true identity and therefore was not a man he wanted to upset. Laughing at him was hardly the way to start their relationship.

“Draco, you’re priceless,” he chuckled, his eyes on the student at his side, “but thanks for fixing my quill.” Then he returned his attention to the front of the room. “I’m very sorry, sir, won’t happen again.” He rested his hands on his desk and smiled at the professor serenely.

He received a glare in return. “Mr. Rivers,” he began in an icy, smooth voice. Harry almost envied him the ability to speak in such a chilling tone. “You are new to this school and your father has undoubtedly neglected to teach you any sense of decorum. Despite these . . . setbacks, this will be the last time you disrupt my class in any fashion without losing points for your house and earning yourself a detention. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, trying to sound humble and not ready to burst out laughing again.

The professor answered with a sneer and then began talking, saying nothing of any great importance that Harry could tell, so he felt free to turn to Draco’s parchment when Draco nudged him in the ribs.

Nice save, but you don’t want to make him angry. He hates Gryffindor more than I do.

Harry suppressed a grin.

I know, he wrote back. But when a gigantic bat comes striding in, it’s hard not to laugh.

Draco began writing a response to this, while Harry began absentmindedly copying down what the professor was saying about the potion they were going to begin brewing today (inwardly excited that the first class wasn’t going to be a total loss and waste of time, like he was expecting most of his first classes to be).

Okay, he does look like a bat, but for Merlin’s sake, he’s Head of Slytherin and he’ll make your life miserable if you get on his bad side.

Harry did not need to be told this, as it was perfectly obvious already. But in the interest of maintaining this precarious almost-friendship as long as possible, he simply wrote, Thanks for the warning.

As Harry suspected, Snape was keeping an eye on him. He had noticed that Draco and Harry were awfully interested in one another’s class notes, and Harry could almost feel him preparing to come over and try to surprise them. So in the instant the professor was looking away, he Vanished the page they’d been using to talk, leaving only what he’d scrawled out about their class agenda for the day.

“Mr. Rivers, let me see that,” Snape demanded.

Harry wordlessly held up the parchment, and was rewarded for his quick thinking with the sight of Snape looking like he’d swallowed a lemon. He dropped Harry’s notes back onto his desk with disdain,

and returned to warning them of the dire consequences of not taking their OWL year seriously. Apparently, he accepted only the brightest Potions students into his sixth-year class, when they began preparing for their NEWT examinations. Harry was bored by the lecture. Sirius had told him he was already at sixth or seventh-year level with his Potions work (which was why Sascha had been paid so handsomely, after all) and he wasn't worried about his grade. He was just worried that Snape would waste half the year making him feel uncomfortable in the classroom.

Well, he wouldn't just take crap from the man, professor or not. He'd been have a reason for hating him that was a lot more logical than James Potter had been mean to him when they were kids.

"Hey, are you paying attention?" Draco hissed, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Not really," Harry muttered. "What?"

"Sweet Merlin, Evan, he's putting the instructions for the Draught of Peace on the board, we have to prepare it."

"Oh," he yawned, and pulled out, not his textbook as the rest of the class was doing, but a pile of handwritten notes that had been stitched together with crimson thread. (Let it not be said that Harry had kissed Madeleine the mayor's daughter for no reason, she'd been invaluable in organizing the notes he'd taken during his studies with Sascha.) Crimson thread was for draughts, green for poisons, blue for antidotes, and so on. He looked through the page on the Draught of Peace, saw nothing in Sascha's methods that disagreed with Snape's, and got to work.

"What is that?"

"Huh?"

Draco gestured with his knife at Harry's notes. "That."

"Notes from my Potions tutor."

“You had a tutor?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Harry replied absently, more interested in properly measuring syrup of hellebore than explaining why he’d had a Potions tutor.

“You mean you already know how to make this potion?”

“Not off-hand, I need the list of ingredients, but I’ve made it before.”

“Why are you even in this class?”

“I have to test for the OWLs before they’ll let me move on to NEWT work. I would have skipped straight to seventh year Potions if they’d allowed it.” He shrugged. “But there’s other subjects I’m at more of a second-year level in, so taking all fifth-year classes is a good compromise.”

He looked up to see Snape staring at him, not with maliciousness, but with sheer curiosity. When he saw Harry looking back, he sneered and veered off to torment the Gryffindor students, Ron and Neville particularly. Hermione, Harry noticed, he left well alone. This was interesting, and Harry filed the information away in his mind for later reference. He then proceeded to prepare the most technically correct and efficient Draught of Peace in the classroom, not trusting himself with any experimental deviations in Snape’s classroom.

After the class was over, Harry walked his sample of the potion up to the front of the room, and lingered there while Snape was reaching out for Draco’s bottled sample. “A private word with you, sir?”

Snape regarded him, then gave him a curt nod. Harry retreated to the side of the room and waited for the rest of the students to pass on their samples and file out.

“Catch up with you at lunch,” Harry muttered to Draco when he raised his eyebrows quizzically in Harry’s direction.

Finally, the classroom was empty and Harry approached the man at the desk covered in generally less-than-perfect Draughts of Peace.

"I overheard you discussing your desire to move into a more advanced class, and my answer is no. You will have to prove your capability to me at your current course level."

"I wasn't even going to ask," Harry said, trying to smile at him. "Although I hope my debut is satisfactory?"

"It is," the man said shortly. "If that is not what you want to talk about, then why did you wish to see me privately?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Professor Snape," he began somberly, his mind carefully blocked against any intrusion. He remembered the man's finesse, and worried he'd get in past Harry's meagre defenses. "You're not making this very easy. So I'll just say it. I'm not my father, nor yet Sirius. I'm just me. And right now, I'm Evan Rivers, whom you've got no cause to hate, so giving me all these dirty looks might well blow it."

"I have no intention of blowing it, I assure you, and you may certainly keep your naïve opinions about me to yourself," Snape said.

Harry sighed. "Yes, sir. It's just . . ." Despite himself, he bit his lip. This was hard to navigate. "There are some things about Slytherin that I really admire, and I think you're a brilliant Potions master. I was hoping we'd get along well enough for me to learn from you. It's kind of hard when you're glaring at me all the time."

Snape stood up, looking murderous. "We shall get along perfectly well, Mr. Rivers, if you will in the future refrain from telling me how to do my job."

"I didn't mean—"

"You are wrong about one thing. You are your father all over again, judging by your arrogance."

Harry scurried out of the classroom without even trying to salvage the conversation, intent on finding food before his next class. Obviously that had been a mistake. But honestly, wasn't anybody in this school reasonable?

When Harry sat down in Sirius' class, he was instantly surrounded by the other Gryffindors; Ron and Seamus plunked down on one side of him, Dean on the other, with Parvati and Lavender directly in front. They shared the class with the fifth-year Hufflepuff students, and it seemed the Gryffindors were preemptively dealing with their new student's penchant to pick friends from other houses. They'd been more than slightly perturbed to see Harry saunter over to Draco after only a few bites of food and discuss something to do with Potions.

It didn't really work. Harry had just turned to see what Neville and Hermione did (they sat in the back and didn't talk to anyone) when he felt a presence coming his way and turned to meet it.

"Hi," said the tall girl with soft lines and a kind face. "Our new boy Liam told us last night how you protected him on the train platform, and I just wanted to say, that was very sweet of you. He seemed very awestruck, and he didn't think he'd remembered to say thank you, so I promised I'd do it for him when I saw you today."

"It wasn't any big deal," Harry protested, but he knew his cheeks were getting red with embarrassment anyway. "I was happy to help."

"I'm Hannah Abbot, by the way," she said, smiling and looking a little pink, herself.

"Oh, right, I'm Evan, it's nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand.

She returned to her seat among the Hufflepuff students, and Harry was faced with strange looks from his roommates.

"He got knocked over, and I helped him up," Harry shrugged. "I didn't know his whole house would thank me for it."

"I talked to her a bit on the train, she's one of the prefects, so it's no wonder she was talking to the new kids," Ron said. "House loyalty is very important in Hufflepuff."

Sirius walked through the door that separated his office from his classroom and stood there dramatically surveying the room. Harry

nearly lost it, thinking this was going to be the second time today he ruined a class by laughing at the teacher, and Dean seemed to be concerned that he was choking on something. He kept his focus very tightly on the front of the room and tried to feel some of the tension that Sirius was feeling as a new employee on his first day. It helped make the laughter go away.

“Good morning, everyone,” he said calmly. “I’m Professor Rivers, as you’ve no doubt guessed.” Harry could immediately spot all the flaws in his faked accent, the places where he sounded much too posh, but he knew Sirius was claiming to have grown up in England so he didn’t worry too much about it. He had an excuse that Harry wouldn’t have. “I’ve been told a little about your history with this class, you tell me if this sounds accurate. Quirrell introduced you to the basics well enough before he turned out to be a nutter. Lockhart was next to useless and you learned nothing. Lupin gave you a fairly good review of Dark creatures from mild to moderate danger. Finally, Moody introduced you to the complexities of harmful curses and how to fight their influence, as well as how to be utterly paranoid. Yes?”

The class murmured various assenting noises, and Sirius smiled.

“Wonderful. That means there’s a wealth of things I can teach you, and I plan to start off this term with a section on dueling. You might meet any manner of Dark wizards in your lifetime, and a fight with one will be different every time. However, knowing the basics of dueling can help you. Some wizards will expect to fight according to rigid rules, so obviously it will help you there. But learning to duel properly will also teach you good response time and give you a calm and rational mindset when you approach a fight, any fight. The ability to keep your head is possibly the most valuable asset you could have in a fight with a Dark wizard, and dueling will help you learn that. After that, we will do a section on powerful shielding and blocking techniques, and we will round out the year by ensuring that you are completely versed in Dark creatures. Any objections?”

Only Harry knew that Sirius meant that question sincerely. If anyone thought it was a ridiculous idea, he would genuinely want to know. But the class seemed eager, bright-eyed, and ready for the challenge. Even he could benefit from this, he knew. Sirius had never taught him

the formal approach to dueling, and he could definitely stand to brush up on shielding techniques, having much theoretical but little practical knowledge of them. This course was going to be great. He grinned at Sirius and gave him a thumbs-up, which he returned with a wink before beginning to write his class rules on the board. They were, mostly, that the students should not talk when he was talking and that they should complete their assignments on time so they were prepared for the next one.

Ron, Seamus, and Dean all leaned in toward him with happy expressions.

“Your dad is going to be brilliant.”

When Harry walked into his Ancient Runes classroom, he was focused on nothing more than succeeding in the class. He had barely any background in this subject, it was merely something he was interested in, and he’d had to promise to work very hard to catch up to the fifth-year level. He just found it more palatable than Divination, what with his personal feelings about portents and prophecy.

Then he saw a head of thick brown hair, and angled himself that direction. He slid into the seat beside, and smiled with nothing more threatening than politeness as he removed a piece of parchment for notes from his bag.

“Hello, Miss Hermione. I didn’t know you would be in this class.”

“Hello,” she said softly, actually daring to meet his eyes for a moment before looking down at her desk.

“You can call me Evan, you know,” he said. “As Divination seems to be the more popular option for Monday afternoon, I have to ask—why Ancient Runes?”

“What about you?” she replied.

“I don’t think much of Divination,” he said, trying to be honest without delving into the underlying reasons. “People put way too much stock in signs and trying to see the future when they ought to be focused on

how they are living their lives right now.”

Hermione was actually looking at him again, and she seemed very pleased in his answer. “I was in Divination for a while,” she said, choosing her words so carefully that she seemed to be offering him some priceless gift by speaking. After observing her with the rest of her classmates, Harry rather thought she was, and he felt honoured. “The more I saw of it, the less I liked it. It seemed so dependent on the person and what they were feeling and their own prejudices, it just wasn’t logical, it was based on feeling some inner eye and . . .” She trailed off, seeming horrified by how many words had come tumbling out of her mouth. “I think Ancient Runes is a fascinating subject,” she said very quickly, finishing her speech.

“I don’t know very much about it yet,” Harry said, giving her a harmless smile. “But I think it’s fascinating, too. I’ll have a lot of work to do to get caught up. Maybe you’d be able to help me with that?”

Her face turned white. “Maybe,” she whispered. He saw her hand clench around a fistful of her robes under her desk.

“If we get a chance to, anyway,” he said with a shrug. “Oh, there’s the professor, I’d better shut up now.”

The professor, a woman who seemed to be immensely serious about everything, began to speak, but Harry’s mind was a million miles away from “concentrating very hard on this class if he wanted to move on to NEWT studies.” He was thinking about Miss Hermione Granger, and about Viktor Krum, and how very much he’d like to meet the Bulgarian Seeker without witnesses to try out a few of the nastier spells he knew.

A/N: A few notes—I had to make a quick edit to chapter 3 and to this chapter and re-upload them, so if you have this story on alert, you might have gotten an email about an extra chapter. Also, the voting is now open for the Quibbler Awards and closes next week, so be sure you get your votes in there! Thank you guys so much for your understanding about the review reply thing—I’m working hard on a couple of chapters, and I hope that I will be able to post another

chapter by Friday, then another next Monday. No promises, of course, but here's hoping!

Chapter Six

Harry's breath came in short, even puffs as he steadily paced his way around the Quidditch pitch. He didn't consider himself much of a runner (that is, he didn't enjoy it that much, though he was perfectly capable of doing so) but he thought it was necessary to maintain his physical stamina. After all, who knew when it would be needed? As long as he could make two laps of the field, he would consider himself to be in decent shape. He was nearing the very end of his run now, and he pushed himself through the slight mist of the early morning air off the lake. He always liked to know he had a little extra energy to give during the final metres.

When he reached the spot marked out as the end of his run, he slowed to a walk, trying to regulate his breathing. He walked for a minute, stretching his arms as he did, then paused to give his legs a good stretch. Then he settled in beneath the goal hoops to practice his forms, picturing Miguel in front of him, thinking of nothing more than maintaining the discipline his old teacher had instilled in him. It was still barely past dawn, and Harry figured no one was even awake to be watching him, so he was entirely focused. It felt good. He'd just determined what his routine would be yesterday morning, and he thought it was a good one.

Some portion of his brain that wasn't focused on his physical exertions was concerned with the homework that lay up in Gryffindor Tower awaiting him. It was Saturday, so he'd have plenty of time for it, but he was hoping to spend part of the day practicing in preparation for trying out as the Gryffindor team Keeper. Still, homework after only the first week of classes! These professors really didn't mess around with education, and Harry was honestly a little pleased by that. He'd wondered if, after having had private tutors devoted entirely to his education, coming to school might not be a step down. Instead, he was finding out that was an entirely arrogant attitude. Hogwarts was hard work. He had some serious catching up to do in Ancient Runes, as he'd thought, as well as in Care of Magical Creatures.

The latter class had begun well. The Gryffindor students partnered with Ravenclaw, and Harry had happened to notice a very pretty girl named Cho among the Ravenclaw students. There was also a

slightly batty girl named Luna, but Harry found himself liking the novelty of her input in the class. It was being taught by a woman called Professor Grubbly-Plank, which Harry gathered was not normal, as it was normally taught by a very large and affable man named Hagrid. No one seemed to know where exactly Professor Hagrid was, but no one seemed overly concerned about his absence, either. Harry found out that Hagrid's lessons tended to be a little less predictable than Grubbly-Plank's.

Harry didn't see a problem with unpredictable lessons, or slightly wild men with a tendency to bring in frightening creatures. When he'd expressed enthusiasm, Parvati and Lavender had piteously explained that he and Hagrid might not get along very well, but they refused to elaborate. It had been explained to him (with no small amount of embarrassment) by Ron Weasley. It was his friendship with Draco Malfoy. Draco had acted like a complete git during their third year and gotten Hagrid's hippogriff killed, and Hagrid pretty much hated Draco's whole family. In fact, a lot of people pretty much hated Draco's whole family, as Harry was coming to realize, and for some good reasons. He'd picked his first friend at the school very rashly, and it was looking as though he was going to have cause to regret it. But there was no going back now, he couldn't take back his word. His plan to challenge interhouse rivalry was going to be that much harder, but he was determined to do it.

Harry headed back inside and went up to Gryffindor Tower, intent on collecting some clothes and getting a shower. When he passed through the common room, he found another student coming down the stairs from the girls' dorms. The red hair made him pause, and he gave Ginny a friendly nod at the bottom of the staircase.

"Morning," she said, looking startled. "You're up early."

"So are you."

"My roommate—don't tell anybody I said this, okay?—has a cold and she's snoring. It kept me up all night."

Ginny's tousled hair and grumpy face made it clear that the girl needed her sleep at night if she was to be in any kind of pleasant mood the following day.

"Sorry to hear that," Harry said, but he was smiling.

"What?" she muttered.

"You've got a line down your face from your pillow."

Ginny clapped a hand over her cheek and glared at him. "What are you doing up so early, Rivers?"

"Aw, come on, it's Evan. I was just getting some exercise."

"Yeah?" she said, looking more interested than exasperated now.

"Short run, some martial arts practice," he said casually, very determined to not lean casually against the wall and try to look roguish. He would also not scratch his abdomen to call attention to his muscles. He was not that ridiculous.

"I couldn't get up that early to run," she said, looking mystified. "I mean, I get why you'd do it, and I know I should get more exercise myself, but . . . it's barely dawn, for crying out loud!"

"Yeah, but in an hour, everyone will want to know what I'm doing, not just you," he said, feeling stupid now because he was just standing there with his arms at his sides.

"I thought you liked attention," she said with a little bit of starch in her voice.

He made a face. "Not that much. I just want to be myself, I don't mean to stand out."

Ginny gave him a curious look. "Merlin, you actually mean that, don't you?"

He frowned. "Um, yeah. Shouldn't I?"

Ginny just laughed. "You are a strange boy, Evan Rivers," she chuckled, and punched him lightly on the arm, moving past him to leave. Then she turned around, and Harry was still standing there, wondering exactly what just happened. "Hey. Can I come with you, next time?"

"Next time what?"

"When you run. I'll join you. Since you apparently enjoy it, I'll try it out."

"Oh. Okay. Tomorrow morning, around barely-dawn-for-crying-out-loud o'clock," he grinned.

She rolled her eyes dramatically, sighing. "Okay, I'll be there."

"I like you this way," he said suddenly, not certain he'd wanted to say it until it was too late.

Her eyes narrowed. "What way?"

"Without your friends, trying to impress them. Just yourself."

Feeling like this would be a mysterious and enigmatic moment to do so, he quickly mounted the stairs, leaving her standing there with her mouth open to respond. He almost laughed, but smothered it. Mysterious, enigmatic people did not ruin their parting lines by giggling.

Sirius found him in the library, which was not a terrible shock. Harry had a tendency to be found in places with books and information and possibly dusty old things. Who he was in the library with was a little more interesting.

"Hey, Evan," he drawled as he approached their table.

"Dad?" he said, looking up with a startled face. "Hi. Um, Dad, this is—"

“Hermione Granger,” Sirius finished. “Miss Granger may be one of my star pupils this year, if her first essay is any indication,” he said, smiling at her and making her look down at her notes with embarrassment, before redirecting his attention to Harry. “Need to talk to you.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Miss Hermione is helping me with Ancient Runes, so I can get caught up with the other students in that class.”

Sirius didn’t move. Harry’s homework could wait an hour, right? He tried not to laugh at Harry, even though he was only now finding out that Harry apparently called all women “Miss.” They hadn’t spent enough time around women for him to notice that.

“She has given me an hour of her valuable time, and I’ll come find you when we’re finished.”

Miss Granger was looking very worried now, and Sirius regretted coming in here. She was so timid, and watching her study partner butt heads with his father was obviously very uncomfortable for her. And really, if he made too many waves, Harry would probably be forced to explain, and that would be messy.

“I’ll be in my office, finishing up with those essays,” he sighed. Damn, he’d meant to drag Harry out of there and talk to him right then to be sure Harry couldn’t escape, but Miss Granger had really gotten to him. He cast a look over his shoulder as he exited the library to see that Harry had pushed his notes aside and was speaking to the girl with a soft, caring expression. “Good luck,” he murmured. If anyone could do it, Harry could, but Sirius was not entirely sure it was possible to bring that girl out of her self-imposed exile.

He graded a few papers and waited for Harry to show up with impatience. He’d been teaching for a few years now, and it was a good job, but he rather missed manual labour. There was something to be said for getting your hands dirty, then going home tired but finished with your work. Being a professor meant that he was never entirely finished with his work, and it meant sitting on his arse half the day. Sirius was not big on sitting around on his arse.

Harry slipped in without knocking, but the door creaked loudly enough that Sirius knew when he entered. He finished reading the last few inches of the essay in front of him—a load of nonsense from someone who had definitely not read the first chapter of *Spellslinger: A Brief History of Dueling*. He marked it as it deserved, then wrote on top, *Unlike you, I know this is drivel because I have read the assigned text. I suggest you do the same and submit this essay again by Friday.*

Then he looked up. “Dumbledore wants to see you.”

Harry sat down with a sigh. “Why?”

“To quiz you on the mating habits of auguries, who knows?”

“He wants to check in on me, huh?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I got the same thing last night. Play nice, okay?”

“What? I like the headmaster all right.”

“You want to go ahead and tell me all the stuff you don’t plan to share with him, just to get it off your chest?”

“What stuff?”

Sirius smiled and shook his head. Even now, Harry sometimes thought he didn’t know exactly what went through the boy’s head. “I’m sure you’ll tell him everything is just fine and it’s smooth sailing. But how’s everything going, really? Are you settling in?”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I think so. Mostly.”

“That stunt you pulled at the welcoming feast didn’t get you in too much trouble?”

“Somebody could have told me where to go.”

“Don’t play stupid, kid. You knew exactly where to go, and you decided you’d rather have some fun.”

Harry grinned at him. "It was fun. Did you see how everybody freaked out?"

Sirius sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Yes. Getting everybody to freak out is not the most inconspicuous thing you've ever done."

Harry shrugged unrepentantly. "I'm not going to pretend I'm not myself, you know. I mean, I'll say my name is Evan, but Evan doesn't like the system here any more than I do."

"Yeah. Just be careful, would you?"

"I will," he said soberly, seeing that Sirius was not joking, was genuinely worried. He didn't know what Sirius was worried about, and Sirius was not ready to say it. He didn't think Harry would take kindly to the suggestion that his new buddy in Slytherin was spying on him and reporting every word that passed between them to his father. After all, the Rivers men had shown up at a very improbable time.

"Well, what about Miss Granger?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Huh? Oh, she takes Ancient Runes, I thought she could help me."

"Oh, sure, Ancient Runes," Sirius teased.

Harry gave him a quelling look. "She's kind of damaged, you know. I'm not trying to do anything with her. I just want her to have a friend."

Sirius frowned, caught off-guard by that. Either Harry was growing up and developing a truly compassionate heart, or he was a much better liar than Sirius had suspected. After the look he'd seen on Harry's face in the library, he thought it was the former, which was great in some ways and frightening in others. Compassionate people got taken advantage of. One of the basic rules of living.

Harry grinned. "Ginny Weasley isn't damaged."

Sirius chuckled. "No?"

“She’s pretty sure of herself, in fact.”

“It’s funny, that when I had her in my class, I noticed her eyes were brown.”

“Really? I didn’t know,” Harry said, pretending to inspect his fingernails.

Sirius frowned. “Isn’t she a little bit, I don’t know, too silly for you?”

Harry shrugged. “She can be. I got her alone for a minute this morning, and I think there’s more to her than she pretends there is.”

“Oh. Well, keep in mind that unlike your previous girlfriend, she’s not approaching twenty years of age. She’s very young.”

Harry grimaced. “God, Sirius, when did I say I was going to leap down her pants the first opportunity she gave me? She’s not even . . . she’s fourteen! I just like her, that’s all.”

Sirius shrugged. “Okay.”

“I will be the soul of propriety.”

“See that you are. Now head up to see Dumbledore before he comes looking for you.”

Harry wrinkled his nose at the thought. “All right, I’m going.”

Sirius stood up and caught Harry in a tight hug. “I love you. You’re doing great.”

Surprised, it took Harry a moment to respond. “Uh, thanks.” He squeezed back. “I love you, too. Now let me go chat with the headmaster.”

“Mr. Rivers, thank you for stopping in,” Dumbledore said when he opened the door to his office, his blue eyes twinkling cheerfully. “I just wanted to see how your first week has gone, of course. I can only

imagine transferring in is difficult, and I wanted to see if there was anything you needed.”

He shut the door, led Harry to a seat at his desk, and sat down himself.

“Now that we’ve gotten away from any interested ears, I shall call you by your given name. But the question remains: is there anything you need?”

Harry shook his head. “No, sir, I’m doing fine.”

“You find you are suited to all your classes?”

“Mostly. I’m a little ahead in some and a little behind in others, but I’m sure it’ll even out soon.”

“Yes, we may hope so,” the headmaster said pleasantly. He offered a small tin to Harry. “Lemon drop?”

“No, thank you, sir. Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?”

“Indeed there is, Mr. Potter.”

Harry made a face. “You can call me Harry.”

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said, sounding completely genuine and giving Harry a warm smile. “I did wish to inquire if there had been any adverse reactions to the incident during your first night with us.”

“You mean, do both houses hate me to the point of assassination attempts?”

“Something like that,” Dumbledore murmured, his calm exterior preserved admirably in the face of Harry’s bluntness.

“They seem okay. It’s becoming kind of obvious that I should have picked pretty much any student other than Draco Malfoy, but at least nobody’s been spitting on me in the hallways yet.”

“I trust not.”

“And who knows? Maybe he’ll learn to make some decisions on his own someday. I’ve heard enough about his father to make me sick, but one can always hope.”

Dumbledore gave him another warm smile. “Yes, one can. I’m very proud of you, you see. I haven’t seen anyone act so courageously—if perhaps a bit rashly—in quite some time. It is one thing to risk your safety, quite another to risk your reputation. I do hope that your actions will have exactly the effect you intended.”

Hope, but don’t expect, Harry saw plainly, which made him a little depressed. Dumbledore, such a permanent fixture at Hogwarts, ought to know much better than he would, whether or not he could really change anything. It didn’t seem likely.

“You will find nothing but encouragement from me,” Dumbledore said, “and advice, should you seek it. But I cannot guarantee that your peers will be so easily convinced. Mr. Malfoy is likely not the only student who is interested in what his parents believe. There are some prejudices that run so deeply in our society that it might not be possible to discover where they were born. But I will never tell you that it is impossible to overcome them, only warn you that it will be difficult.”

Some people his age, Harry thought, would be so uncomfortable with this line of conversation (which had taken a turn to the deadly serious with surprising rapidity and without his intentions) that they would laugh and ask the headmaster what he was talking about and pretend to be stupid because they knew adults thought them to be so. Harry had never given anyone the impression that he was stupid, or so he hoped, and thought it was a cowardly act when teenagers did that, anyway. So he resigned himself to feeling a little uncomfortable.

“What sort of things are you thinking of, sir? What do you mean by prejudices?”

“Do you mean to tackle them all, Harry?”

"If I have to, sir."

Dumbledore laughed, looking delighted, and from the corner Fawkes trilled out a bubbling song that sounded as though he were laughing, as well. Harry frowned at them. He was serious, here.

"I do not mean to give you the impression that I am laughing at you, my boy," Dumbledore began to say.

"I'm not going around looking for righteous causes or anything," Harry interrupted him crossly.

"I am only laughing because I am overjoyed to find a person with such spirit and determination. I have met very few people in my life who would say something like that and truly mean it, Harry. I am very pleased, indeed."

Harry had his mouth open to be cross some more, but he snapped it shut. "Oh. Really? Sirius always thinks I'm funny."

"Sirius has matured into an admirable man despite the trauma of his youth, but he still has a tendency to think in terms of what effects his own life, and devotes his energies there. He was quite the idealist when he was a young man, but some bitter experiences have made him very much a pessimist."

"And I'm an optimist?" Harry mumbled, looking down with embarrassment, and therefore annoyance at being embarrassed. He didn't mean to make the word "optimist" sound like "drug-addled murderer," but it came out with similar scorn.

"I do hope so," Dumbledore said, still smiling. "I am one, myself, and I find it does not interfere with the quality of my life if I do not allow it to."

Did he just make a joke? A good joke? Harry had to laugh.

"If you do not have any major concerns about school, perhaps you would like to hear about what has been happening outside the school?"

Harry stopped laughing. "Do you mean . . . Voldemort?"

"I do. I thought it would interest you to know that we have not yet gathered any information of consequence, but we are hoping that Peter Pettigrew can be pressed for more information. At the moment, he is stubbornly maintaining that he knows nothing."

"Have you let Sirius or Remus at him?"

"Not yet. If you are thinking that they may be able to intimidate him or guilt him into giving up information, you are likely correct. But I had some hopes that he may yet be turned to our side based on its own merits."

Harry snorted. "He's too much of a coward to be on anyone's side unless they're winning."

Dumbledore looked saddened by that. "You are probably right."

Harry was starting to wonder just how much of an optimist the headmaster really was, but he didn't think it made him respect the older man any less. If he'd managed to maintain such an attitude throughout such a long life which must necessarily be full of a million battles and disappointments, then more power to him. But he figured that they didn't really need to intimidate Pettigrew, anyway. They just needed to set a date for his hearing and he'd squeal like a pig so he could get off easy.

"And Voldemort himself? Any news?"

"Not this week," Dumbledore said soberly. "Although I am sure that will change quickly. There are a few people on our side who are making it their business to know when anyone, magical or Muggle, goes missing or turns up dead unexpectedly. There were a few incidents reported over the summer, and that number will only continue to climb, with Voldemort now inhabiting an able body."

Okay, maybe he isn't that much of an optimist.

“Is there anything I should be doing?”

Dumbledore smiled. “You should be working hard in your classes to ensure you will receive good marks on your OWL exams in the spring, of course. I would like nothing better than for you to remain focused on having a successful future. But in the fight against Voldemort, what you must do is continue to inform me if you experience any more dreams, like those you reported to me when you arrived. Have there been any more recently?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I told you that I felt strange sensations a few times but without clear pictures this summer, and I haven’t had even those in the week since the term started.” He sighed. “I’m sure it won’t last. They’ll be back. I wish I had better control over it.”

“It may be possible to give you some protection against those dreams, a more effective way of closing your mind to outside influences.” Dumbledore looked like he meant to continue, but paused. “I will need to think about it and I will let you know what I can do.”

Harry was a little suspicious of that, but shrugged. “All right.”

“How do you think Sirius is doing so far?” Dumbledore surprised him by asking.

“Oh, good I guess,” Harry answered. “I mean, no one hates him yet. The girls all appear to think he’s quite handsome, so that helps their attention span. I haven’t heard any complaints yet, except that he’s already assigned a short essay. I like the syllabus he’s laid out for our year. There is some purely informational material, and some really good practical stuff as well.”

Dumbledore looked pleased. “I spoke to him last night, and he seemed to think things were going well, but he said you might be a better judge of the students.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, they like him so far. He’s been really nice to Miss Hermione and to Neville Longbottom, and I think the students respect his ability to do that. He’s already had Neville help him demonstrate a couple of dueling positions.”

Dumbledore seemed to age a few years all at once. "Neville is a wonderful boy," he murmured, "with as much training as it was possible to give someone so young. But his confidence has been severely tested in the last two years."

Harry simultaneously wanted to comfort Dumbledore and start shouting at him, but he refrained from doing either. "I'm sure that's true, but he really needs to decide if he's going to do something with his life, and get on with it. He can't mope forever."

"I would not necessarily characterise it as moping," Dumbledore said softly.

Rather than press his opinion further, Harry just said, "I guess you must really love him."

"Dearly. Although I believe he has learned to hate me. It does not make it any easier that he has always had trouble making friends."

Harry shrugged. "I'm going to try, you know. To make friends with him. But that depends on him, too. Sometimes I think he's bad at it on purpose. He pushes us all away."

Dumbledore looked grieved. "Yes, he always has."

Harry had much more to say about Neville, but he'd rather say it to Neville. Talking to Dumbledore about it wouldn't change anything. He changed the subject.

"You know, I expected the Ministry of Magic to be a lot more . . . I don't know, involved with Sirius and I. Sticking their noses in around here. Not that I'm complaining. Just surprised that they aren't pushing their boundaries."

Dumbledore's mouth thinned at that. "That is another reason that I am afraid I need to talk to you. The Ministry will be poking their noses in very shortly. I negotiated as much freedom for you as I could—the Minister was quite ready to put you both in the cell beside Pettigrew

in Azkaban—but I have had to make some concessions concerning the freedom of the school.”

Harry felt his gut clench. He knew it. He knew it all along, that something about this nearly ideal scenario was going to go wrong.

“What kind of concessions?”

“I have not finished presenting my case,” Dumbledore said with a dangerous glint in his eye, “but suffice it to say that we may find ourselves under close scrutiny soon.”

“Well, I’ve spoken to him,” Harry said, sprawling comfortably in the chair in front of Sirius’ desk. “Aren’t you finished with those essays yet?”

“So eager to be rid of me?” Sirius asked, straightening up at his desk and groaning, putting a hand on his back.

“At least you get to go home at night to your own bed,” Harry said dryly. “I have to stay here and sleep with four other guys.”

“It’s tragic, really,” Sirius said, pulling a distressed face. “I don’t know how I survived it, honestly, nor all the hundreds of years’ worth of students who have shared rooms at this school . . .”

Harry just glowered at him.

“You. Can’t. Apparate.”

“Yet,” Harry added.

Sirius stood up and stretched his arms over his head. “That made my muscles awfully tense,” he said. “You feel like sparring a bit?”

“What, here?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “At the house, you idiot. Where all our sparring gear is.”

Harry frowned that he couldn't just say yes, like he wanted to. "I need to do some homework first." Rotten homework.

"And I'm exhausted from grading all these essays," Sirius said with a sigh. "What about tomorrow morning? I'll make sure the headmaster and Professor McGonagall know you'll be out for a few hours. That work for you?"

Harry smiled with a slightly ominous cast. "I'm getting up very early tomorrow. You can pick me up and take me back to the house after I finish my run."

"Your run?"

"I've decided to run around the Quidditch pitch two laps every day. Early."

"How early?"

"About barely-dawn-for-crying-out-loud o'clock."

"What?"

"Oh . . . nothing. Just way before you probably plan to get out of bed."

Harry and Sirius were enjoying a late breakfast after a long, satisfying workout that consisted mainly of trying to hurt one another. Kreacher, who had made the brunch, had obviously been spending too much time alone. He'd improved after having them around all summer, but now he was back to the way he used to behave. He kept up a constant stream of muttering while he clattered around the kitchen and for the most part ignored both of the room's other occupants.

"He keeps talking to my mother's portrait," Sirius said with a theatrical shudder. "I hear nothing but blood traitor this, scum and vermin that. Remus has been over here a time or two, and you don't even want to know how my mother—and therefore Kreacher—feels about werewolves."

"I imagine I don't," Harry drawled, drinking a glass of juice and reading the newspaper.

"He's been having a hard time with that book collector lately," Sirius said, munching on some sliced fruit but not really paying attention to what he was eating. "I don't know if his job will last much longer."

Harry was engrossed in an article about how the disappearance of a prominent pureblood wizard certainly did not mean that Voldemort was involved in any way. He was amused, in a way. If that was true, why even bring Voldemort up? Consequently, he wasn't paying very much attention to what Sirius was saying.

As it turned out, that didn't matter. Sirius' musings were proven only moments after he'd uttered them, when there was a knock on the door and Kreacher appeared in the doorway to announce that the filthy, diseased animal was here. Remus came in, looking pale and shocked.

"Do you have any coffee?" he asked hoarsely, his eyes a little too wide.

Harry had put the paper aside when Kreacher announced Remus' arrival, and he wordlessly poured out a cup of coffee and pushed it to Remus as the man sat down at the table. Sirius was just looking at him.

"Thank you," Remus said to Harry humbly, then he turned his shocked face on Sirius. He appeared at a loss for words.

"Don't tell me. It's over."

Remus nodded. "It was that damned book."

Sirius nodded, looking aggrieved.

"What book?" Harry questioned, feeling like it was okay to ask since they were talking about it right in front of him.

"I found a book my employer wanted, but it was in Borgin & Burkes. It had a curse laid on it so that if it was touched by someone not of pure wizarding blood, they would develop an awful skin disease on whatever part of their body they'd touched it with. I asked Sirius to take a look at it, but he couldn't lift the curse. So I told my employer that it couldn't be found, but he seemed to sense I was lying. He got very upset." Remus drank almost the entire cup of coffee in front of him in one go, then stared at the dregs numbly. Harry refilled the cup as unobtrusively as possible. "He also said I wasn't reliable enough. That there had been too many instances when he couldn't reach me for several days."

No further explanation was needed. Remus obviously couldn't explain that he was unavailable due to lycanthropy, and so he was forced to allow his employer to believe he was not reliable. Another job had gone up in flames because he was a werewolf.

"I'm going to lose my flat," he said hollowly. "I won't find work again before rent is due."

"Maybe we ought to give you something a little stronger than coffee," Sirius said, but his lips were twitching with the beginnings of a smile.

"Padfoot, if you laugh at this, so help me I will lock you in with me on the next full moon."

"I've missed the old days," Sirius said, grinning now.

Remus turned to look at Harry, puzzled by his friend's behaviour, only to find that Harry was smiling as well.

"Oh, come on," Harry said. "It's not that bad."

"It's pretty bad," Remus said with disbelief.

"For Merlin's sake, Moony, do you think you'll be sleeping on the street or something?"

Now he just stared.

“You can have Regulus’ old room.”

“You want me to stay here?”

“I know it’s a depressing old pile of rot, but—”

“No, I mean . . . you don’t mind?”

Sirius rolled his eyes at Harry. “I’m not doing you any favours, you know. You’ll have to clean out his moth-eaten old things, and I’m sure every bit of it is green and silver underneath all that dust. I hope you don’t have an allergic reaction.”

“Sirius, I don’t—”

“You have any idea how quiet this place is, most of the time?” Sirius demanded. “I’ve been losing my mind! If you move in here, you have to promise to talk all the time, and play the radio, and that sort of thing.”

Remus stared at him for another moment, then he suddenly smiled. “You don’t remember me very well, do you?”

Sirius sighed theatrically. “Well, having a quiet housemate is better than having no one but Kreacher.”

Harry gave him a pointed look.

“You know very well you are enjoying that school,” Sirius said to him dryly, before redirecting his efforts towards convincing Remus that this was the perfect solution to everyone’s problems. “Moony, don’t be ridiculous. I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want you to, so don’t start your self-effacing routine, I know exactly how you are . . .”

When the Order starts meeting here, they’re not going to know what hit them, Harry thought to himself, gulping down the rest of his juice and heading upstairs to change clothes. He had to get back to school.

Chapter Seven

They were approaching the end of their second week of classes. Harry was still on somewhat shaky ground where Ancient Runes was concerned, at least compared to Hermione . . . but he was starting to get the feeling that he would always be on shaky academic ground when compared to Hermione. He felt much better about Care of Magical Creatures, which was still being run by Professor Grubbly-Plank. While there were many creatures he didn't know about, that class was very matter-of-fact and dealt a lot in the realm of common sense. There were plenty of books on the subject, a great number of them to be found in the Hogwarts library, if ever he were going to be made responsible for an unfamiliar animal.

"Evan, over here!" waved Ginny and her twin brothers from the middle of the Gryffindor table. He sauntered over to join them in eating dinner, wondering why they required his presence. He'd been hoping to try to talk to Neville tonight, maybe see what he thought of Sirius' class. He just wanted to see if it was possible for Neville to be drawn out of the hole he'd crawled into and buried himself in. He hoped the Weasleys would make it quick.

"Evening, everyone. What can I do for you?"

"Get on the Quidditch team, of course," Ginny said, practically bouncing in her seat. "Tryouts are next week."

"Oh, believe me, I know," he said wryly, thinking of the way Angelina Johnson would sit in the common room devising new plays and practice schedules until Professor McGonagall practically dragged her out by her hair and sent her to bed. "Angelina won't let me forget."

The twins both grinned wickedly. "Tell us, would it be awful of us to test out a new product we're inventing on her?"

Harry grinned. "Depends on the product."

"We just think she needs a brief distraction—"

"A little relaxation—"

"If she's going to be at her best for the tryouts."

"Am I ever going to be able to tell you two apart?" Harry sighed hopelessly. He grabbed a piece of bread and the butter knife.

Ginny shook her head. "They even manage to fool Mum sometimes," she said.

"So, we're trying to scrape together the supplies for a whole range of joke products," whichever twin it was said. "Testing them on Angelina would just be a side benefit."

"She'd hex you until you couldn't sit your brooms for a month," Ron said, who was passing by on his way out of the hall.

Ginny glared at him. "You don't even know Angelina, Ron, and you wouldn't unless you miraculously earn a place on the team this year."

Ron's face went scarlet, and he marched out without a word.

"He tried out last year for Keeper, and he was awful," Ginny told Harry, shaking her head. "But he thinks he can pretend he's on the team anyway or something."

It was times like these that Harry wanted to punch her instead of kiss her. She could be so cool when it was just the two of them, running in the morning and watching her determination pushing her way beyond what her current physical stamina allowed for. But when she was trying to impress somebody . . . She was still pretty, but Harry was rapidly losing interest in her. She had an insecure streak almost as wide as Draco's, but her place on the Quidditch team had bloated her ego without giving her the maturity to cope with popularity.

"Anyway, we just wanted to give you some tips on how to impress Angelina during the tryouts, things she'll be looking for in particular . . ." Ginny continued, but Harry cut her off.

"If I can't make it in on my own merits, I won't be doing the team any favours, you know." He took a bite out of his bread. Yum, sourdough.

“We know. We think you’re our best option this year, that’s all.”

The twins were suddenly not paying attention, and one of them nudged Harry in the ribs with his elbow. “Think he’s looking at you, Evan.”

Harry turned and saw with dismay that Severus Snape was walking with his best ominous-figure-in-black-robos pose, and his eyes were fixed on his least favourite pupil.

“Hello, Professor,” the twins said in unison, both looking pleased to see him.

The man’s dark eyes flickered briefly over the twins, and he graced them with enough of his attention to remark that they were not likely to earn any OWLs this year if they were too focused on Quidditch. Harry was surprised. For Snape, simply speaking without sarcasm was practically a declaration of undying love. That he got along with the twins was impossible to fathom, except that Harry remembered a conversation he’d once had with their brother Bill at a bar in Egypt, just after the twins had fought with Quirrel. He found himself hoping they didn’t speak to Bill too often, or that Bill didn’t really remember him and Sirius, because he couldn’t remember what story they’d given the oldest Weasley sibling.

“Professor McGonagall requires you in her office, Mr. Rivers,” Snape then said stiffly, with no attempt at a greeting.

Harry frowned. He hadn’t gotten into trouble in Transfiguration class yet, as far as he was aware, and performed their classwork very adequately. Maybe it was something in her capacity as the Head of Gryffindor. Maybe she took issue with how early he got up in the morning? Did they have some kind of minimum number of hours they had to sleep?

“Do I have a detention or something?” he asked.

“I said nothing of the kind, Mr. Rivers. I merely said that your presence is required in her office. Immediately.”

Snape swept away, apparently unable to walk like a normal person. Harry rolled his eyes at his companions as he rose from the table, snagging a drumstick of roast chicken that remained on the platter in front of them.

"I'll see you all in the common room later, right?"

"Yeah, see you."

"Unless McGonagall reduces you to a pile of ash."

"Oh, ha ha," Harry said, and jogged out to hurry up the stairs, nibbling at his chicken as he went. All joking aside, Professor McGonagall was not a person you wanted to make wait too long. He still clutched half the leg in his hand when he knocked on the door, just as it occurred to him that McGonagall was one of the few people who knew his identity (a necessary evil, since she remembered Sirius Black only too well) and she might have something to talk to him about concerning that.

"Enter," McGonagall said crisply.

He came in feeling very small, suddenly. He stopped just inside the door and stared at Professor Snape, who was standing to the side of Professor McGonagall's desk looking bored. McGonagall herself wore a very pinched expression.

"How did you get up here so fast?"

Snape didn't answer, and he looked at McGonagall.

"You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

Still looking pinched, she gave him a cold look. "Discard that disgusting thing, please, at once."

Harry looked down at the piece of chicken in his hand with surprise, having mostly forgotten he had it. "Oh, right," he mumbled, giving it a

look of regret and wincing when his stomach growled as he threw it in the wastebasket near the door.

“It is necessary to do this right now, Severus?” Professor McGonagall asked, throwing her sharp look away from Harry (to his relief) and towards her colleague.

“I understand that he has homework to complete in your class. I wouldn’t dream of keeping him up too late to be able to get to it,” Snape said with a smile.

McGonagall’s lips pursed together, then she turned back to Harry. “I apologise for the confusion, Mr. Rivers. It is not I who require your time, but Professor Snape. However, due to the nature of what you two must discuss, we felt it was best to give the illusion that you are speaking to me, rather than to him.” She stepped around her desk and toward the door. “Unless you need me, I will leave you to it. I shall be in the headmaster’s office.”

“Uh, goodnight,” Harry said, feeling very confused.

He didn’t have to stay that way long. As soon as Professor McGonagall had exited, Snape took a step forward and explained the whole thing.

“The headmaster has informed me, Mr. Potter, of your unusual dreams, and I agree with him that they probably indicate some type of connection between you and the Dark Lord. I am certain you see how dangerous this is, for if you can see into his mind, he can surely see into yours. The headmaster has asked me to give you lessons in Occlumency. This is a subtle art that—”

“I think I know what it is,” Harry interrupted him before he could go into a long-winded speech. He tended to wax poetic about things he happened to be good at. Harry tried to look humble. “Having a proper teacher who can help me block out Voldemort’s influence would be wonderful.”

Snape glared at him. “You speak the Dark Lord’s name as if you have nothing to fear.”

"I speak his name because I refuse to call people by jumped-up ridiculous titles. He's not my lord, he just managed to steal some of my blood before I could get away. However, I don't really relish the idea of him poking around in my head when I'm not paying attention." So much for humility. I'd really meant to behave better around him. Argh, why does Snape have to be so aggravating all the time? "I beg your pardon, sir. I don't mean to get carried away, but I would be happy to take lessons from you."

Snape seemed to smell something rotten, by the look on his face. "I will not lie by expressing a similar happiness, but I have agreed to do as the headmaster has asked. We will continue to meet here, in Professor McGonagall's office. You shall simply say that you are meeting with your head of house for regular check-ins on your progress at your new school, as I cannot think of any reasons for you to be spending time in my office every week."

"Yeah, too bad," Harry muttered, hopefully too quietly for Snape to hear. "Okay, when?"

"Every week, at seven o'clock. We will meet again next Thursday."

"Yes, sir. Um, will we be starting tonight?"

"No, Potter. You may go."

"Oh. All right. Thank you, sir."

Harry scuttled out as quickly as he could. He'd come into dinner late already, as he'd been studying with Hermione, and he was fairly certain that there would be no one left in the Great Hall by the time he got down there. So he went directly to the common room in Gryffindor, resigning himself to doing his Transfiguration homework and going to bed hungry.

When he got there, he found most of the furniture occupied, and the Weasley twins were off in the corner whispering over something and arguing in obvious privacy. He sighed, and flopped down on a rug near the fire, throwing his bag down beside him. He dug his notes out

and pulled his wand from his pocket so he could practice the spells they'd gone over yesterday. He cast a brief look around for Hermione to see if she wanted to practice, but she wasn't there. He did see Ron, Seamus, and Dean, but by listening to their conversation he gathered they were writing an essay for Snape that he'd already finished.

Harry gave up, and began studying on his own. Before he got too far, though, he saw a pair of scuffed shoes appear near his bag, and he looked up to see Neville standing over him. He looked extremely uncomfortable, for which Harry felt sad. Even after all his attempts to make conversation and be nice to the other boy, Neville was still painfully awkward with him. The time was definitely not right to reveal his identity to Neville and discuss the situation.

"All right there, Neville?" he said pleasantly.

"Yeah," Neville said, shuffling his feet and looking at Harry's bag. "Listen, it's just that I saw Professor Snape drag you out before you'd eaten, and I figured you would be studying like the rest of us, so I thought . . ." Harry saw that Neville was holding one of the large cloth dinner napkins wrapped around something. Harry sat up straight as Neville leaned down, and accepted the proffered bundle. He opened it to see an entire sandwich and an apple. "I asked the house elves in the kitchen for something I could bring you."

House elves—of course! No wonder I never see anybody working! Harry ignored his moment of discovery to express his appreciation. "Oh, wow. Thanks, Neville, that's really nice of you. I'm starving." He set his wand down so he could hold the surprising but certainly not unwelcome meal, and grinned up at Neville. "Have you gone over the homework for McGonagall's class yet?"

"Not yet."

"Sit down, then, we can practice on each other."

He expected that Neville had already had all the attention he could handle for one evening, and that he'd slink away to study alone. Neville surprised him yet further by silently sinking down onto the rug beside him and drawing his wand out of his robes.

"You probably want to eat first, so I'll just look at my notes for a minute."

"Mmm," Harry agreed, already chewing.

"So, what do you reckon with this assembly tomorrow night?" Ron said as they were heading up the stairs to the dormitory.

"Er, assembly?" Dean queried.

"The big one, for the entire school, with the announcements posted all over?" Ron prompted the other boy's memory.

"Right, that one. What do you mean?"

"Well, they didn't exactly say what it's for, did they?"

Harry felt a sinking in his stomach that was becoming altogether too familiar. He was almost certain that the upcoming assembly was to do with none other than the results of negotiations between Headmaster Dumbledore and Minister Fudge. It couldn't be anything good if they needed to have a huge gathering to make an announcement for it. Harry thought of what Dumbledore had said about close scrutiny, and had a vision of Ministry sentries posted in every corridor releasing constant reports to the Minister about everything that happened in the school. Or maybe just following Harry around reporting his every move.

"I wonder if somebody got fired," Dean said.

"Hope it's Snape," Seamus said darkly.

"Maybe somebody died," Dean continued, eyes widening at the thought.

"Still hope it's Snape," Seamus muttered.

"It's not anything like that, or someone would have said," Ron objected. "Maybe . . ." he dropped his voice, "it's to do with You-Know-Who."

Seamus made a twisted face. "Dumbledore's losing it if he believes what they've been saying about that. I hope that's not what it's for."

"I'd rather somebody had died," Dean added, wrinkling his nose.

Ron just looked at them with strain around the corners of his mouth like he desperately wanted to speak and was trying not to. Harry didn't much care for this line of conversation, anyway.

"They're probably just announcing the advent of sex education classes," he said, pushing open the door and going into their room, hoping that would effectively end it. He turned around to see them all giving him funny looks. "What? Muggle schools all have them."

"Yeah, but that's because Muggles are weird," Ron said plainly.

He noticed that Dean had gone strangely stiff, and turned his back on them to dress down for bed. Seamus, who was openly half and half, didn't seem concerned by the conversation. But Harry remembered Dean saying he didn't know about his father, and reckoned that the conversation might be uncomfortable for him. Well, too late to turn back now. Harry needed to know if he was considered some kind of outcast for spending too much time around Muggles.

"If you call not having magic weird. They're actually pretty normal."

Ron yanked his shirt over his head, but didn't stop giving Harry a look that said he was crazy.

"Says you."

Harry gave a loud groan and fell back on his bed, still fully clothed. "If you try to call me a Muggle-lover, I'm going to point out what your father does for a living."

"I wasn't going to say anything like that, I'm not a psychotic blood purist," Ron protested. "I've got nothing against Muggles, mate. Just don't see why you'd want to go to school with them when you could be at a school like this where you don't have to hide anything."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Harry managed to say, then he rolled over, pressed his face into his pillow, and howled with laughter. No, he wasn't hiding a thing.

When they entered the Great Hall, everyone paused for a moment in the doorway before continuing into the room. Which was actually a bit annoying, since it was clogging up the entry and creating a pushy crowd in the hall. But Harry understood why when he got to the door. He continued through without stopping on principle, but he understood.

The long tables were all gone, replaced by rows and rows of wooden benches. The hangings that normally declared the four houses had been removed and replaced by hangings that showed the school crest, and across the front of the door was a banner that had a smiling, waving Cornelius Fudge pictured beside the words "Ministry of Magic: Because We Care."

Oh, no . . . Harry thought, his stomach sinking yet again.

He slid onto a bench and sat with his shoulders hunched and wishing he weren't there. What was going to happen. His eyes sought out Dumbledore, and he found the Headmaster seated in stern silence at the head of the table at the front of the room. Beside him was a . . . by Merlin, was that a woman? She looked like a frog. A pink frog. An ugly pink frog. She was wearing a ghastly pink suit with some kind of houndstooth pattern in darker pink and she had an actual godforsaken bow in her hair. Maybe she was mentally challenged, Harry thought in bewilderment. No sane and rational person could believe they looked stylish in that. Well, maybe if they were twenty and svelte and had tons of attitude, but this woman was not that. She was short, squat, and horrid.

Harry tried to reason with himself. He said that his instant dislike was due to the fact that he knew she was from the Ministry and he didn't

want the interference. But then Draco sat down next to him and said cheerfully,

“Who’s the hideous old bat by Dumbledore?”

“No idea. She seems to care, though.”

“What are you on about?”

Harry pointed out the banner with one finger, trying not to make any movements large enough that it would call down the woman’s attention.

Draco laughed out loud, apparently delighted. “Oh, yeah, that’s our Ministry all right. Fudge cares about anybody who has enough money to pay him to.” He sounded awfully bitter when he said that. Maybe he wasn’t as happy about his father having the Minister in his pocket as he might be. That was good. That was a crack that a wedge could be driven into. And it was becoming easier to think that way about people he was supposed to be friends with, as if this were politics or war or both—which upset him, but didn’t upset him enough.

Harry spotted Hermione shuffling into the room, her head down. There were a few other Gryffindor girls walking to one side of her, but she looked alone, even among them. They were chattering happily and ignoring her silence. Harry had asked Parvati about Hermione once, and Parvati had basically said that the other girls looked out for her, but couldn’t deal with her psychological issues and so they didn’t try. She hadn’t said it in so many words, but the meaning was there. Harry hated that. Either be friends with the girl all the way, or don’t be friends with her at all, in his opinion. This halfway thing wasn’t doing her any favours.

He waved to her, not really caring if the movement drew attention to him now. She was a little higher on his priority list than hiding from the Ministry—after all, how long was he going to be able to do that? Hermione saw him, and the look on her face changed from brooding to an uncertain smile, and she veered off toward him.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Miss High-and-Mighty,” Draco murmured.

“Don’t,” Harry said sharply.

Draco looked surprised, and even mildly disgusted. “You like her then, do you Evan?”

Harry frowned. “She’s my friend, so keep your opinions on her to yourself.”

Draco shrugged, his face twisted into a sneer but a silent sneer, so Harry considered it a compromise and didn’t try to harass him into true civility. He saw the moment when Hermione noticed Draco, though. Her tiny smile disappeared, and her head turned to look for other seats. She was close enough for Harry to jump up and lay a gentle hand on her arm, guiding her to the seat without trying to actually grab her. Even that much contact made her go pale, but she allowed Harry to touch her—which was a great leap forward, he thought.

“Draco promises to behave,” he whispered, smiling at her as kindly as possible.

Hermione sighed. “Is there some reason you want us to get along?”

“You’re both friends of mine, it would be nice if you could,” he said, without believing for a moment that it was possible. Draco the pureblood prince of Slytherin with a cruel streak a mile wide, and the shy, bookish, Muggle-born scholar of Gryffindor . . . getting along? Not going to happen. But maybe they could speak to one another without obvious loathing, if only for his benefit.

Luckily, the headmaster got up to speak before the people on either side of Harry could start in bickering. It was almost a blessed relief to find out what manner of busybody the Ministry had sent, if it meant not having to listen to thinly-veiled contempt from the people seated on the bench with him.

Suddenly, the head of shining red hair two rows in front of him turned around. He’d known it was Ginny up there without seeing her face, but she turned when the girl beside her whispered something in her

ear, and her face looked stunned when she spotted Harry with Draco and his two favourite cronies Crabbe and Goyle lined on one side of him, and Hermione on the other. She turned back around abruptly and said something to her seatmate, who was, Harry realized, Alicia Spinnet. He looked again and saw the entire Quidditch team of last season was all sitting together. They seemed to be spending more and more time around each other the closer to the beginning of the season they got. Maybe it was a subconscious bonding thing.

Harry tuned in to Dumbledore.

“ . . . and we have always striven to offer the best education, and indeed, the best environment for that education, that it is possible to give. Hogwarts has ever been considered a remarkable school, and has, we hope, made its students feel at home here. But we have also made it our goal to listen, to hear the concerns and comments of the magical citizens who give so much support to our school. And so, we have heard the concerns from the Minister, and from members of our own school board, and created a plan of action to lay to rest these concerns. We have worked together with the Ministry to design a program that will test Hogwarts, to ensure that it will always excel in the ideals we have set for ourselves. In keeping with that vision, may I introduce to you Madam Delores Umbridge, previously the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, and now holding the newly created title of High Inquisitor at Hogwarts. She symbolises the educational reform the Ministry has made its goal, and we must welcome her to the school.”

Harry had felt himself growing colder and colder the more he heard, and now he thought he might have developed a layer of ice around himself. It was obvious from Dumbledore's extremely careful language that he was not enthusiastic about this. High Inquisitor? What sort of title was that?

The woman in pink stood with a simpering smile on her toady face. Harry hadn't known it was possible for his spirits to sink any lower, but they did when she started speaking.

“Thank you for your kind words, Headmaster.”

Kind words? That was kind?

“I am, of course, delighted to be among you, and to see your enthusiasm to share the vision of the Ministry in improving the quality of your educational experience.”

Harry looked out over the students and saw a lot of stunned expressions and raised eyebrows. Enthusiasm, indeed.

“I can promise you that I will do my utmost to uphold your trust in me, with determination and resolve.”

Harry couldn't help his bitter laughter. He muffled it behind his hands and ignored the weird looks he was getting from Draco. Trust? What trust? They didn't even know her!

“Together, we can make this school everything it ought to be. We can work together to ensure quality and excellence. We can reform out-of-date practices, tighten loose reins, and take a closer look at the classrooms where our brilliant teachers work. The Ministry will be able to promise its citizens that their children are receiving an education we can be proud of.”

Harry was unable to believe what he was seeing, hearing. Dumbledore had actually agreed to this complete horseshit? All she was really saying was that the Ministry thought the headmaster was doing a poor job and they were going to take over his responsibilities. It was so easy to see past the falsity of her squeaky-cute little voice and smile, Harry didn't think it was any ability of his at work. You didn't need Legilimency to find Delores Umbridge distasteful.

He looked around. The students weren't getting any happier. He saw Neville across the middle aisle, his arms crossed in front of him and a brooding look on his face. He seemed to realize he was being watched, and turned his head. He and Harry met one another's eyes in a moment of perfect understanding, of open communication and common purpose, then Neville sort of shut down and turned away again.

“Inquisitor Umbridge’s” speech wasn’t terribly long or anything, but it couldn’t be over soon enough. When she finished, Dumbledore stood again to make some final comment about cooperation, then they were dismissed to go to their common rooms. Not feeling encouraged to linger, the Slytherins quickly parted ways with Harry and Hermione. Thinking she might open up now that Draco was gone, Harry turned his attention to her as they were shuffled with the crowd upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

“Well, Miss Hermione, what did you think?”

Hermione had a frown line between her eyebrows, and her face was deep in concentration. “She was lying.”

“I know,” Harry said, frowning back. “It’s obvious that the Ministry doesn’t care about us, or improving, they just want to interfere because they don’t want any magical institution to be out from under their power.”

Hermione shook her head, her hair falling around her face and hiding it. She did that often, like she was really trying to hide. “No, it was more than that. It was like . . . it seemed as though there were another reason she’s here, besides the plain intention of meddling. Like something specific.”

Harry shrugged, his mouth dry with anxiety over how close to the truth she had come with that. “Obviously it’s something between her and the headmaster.”

Hermione looked troubled by that, and the frown line did not go away. “He wouldn’t keep secrets that would harm the students, would he, Evan? Not Dumbledore.”

Harry sighed softly. No, these secrets don’t harm the school. Just those of you who might choose to stand with me against Voldemort. He suddenly wished he didn’t need allies in this fight—allies who could be hurt. He wished he could do it alone.

Book Two:Awakening

Arc Two

Over the Edge

Your fate is unkind

If I had a heart

It would be yours

You have suffered

If I could love

I would love your courage

You can't seem to breathe

If I had lungs

I would save you

You can't scream for help

But I need no ears

I can rescue you

We're poised on the edge

If we had feet

We would jump now

We're hoping for more

If we had dreams

We'd live in them

We stop and we start

If we had wings

We'd have no obstacles

We fight to be free

With our little faith

We are awakening

"When he whom I love travels with me, or sits a long while holding me
by the hand,

When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason
hold not, surround us and pervade us,

Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom—I am silent—I
require nothing further,

I cannot answer the question of appearances, or that of identity
beyond the grave;

But I sit or walk indifferent—I am satisfied

He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me."

Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances — Walt Whitman

Chapter Eight

"It's going to be awful, I know it," Harry muttered, folding one leg up underneath him as he settled deeper into the sofa.

"It doesn't have to be, though," Ginny objected, her head bent over the book resting on her lap. "What has she done so far?"

"You mean besides patrol all the hallways and force everyone to tuck their shirts in and stop touching each other at all? She has it in for Fred and George already."

"Well, she might be a little uptight, but that won't kill anybody." Ginny shifted position on the floor, uncrossing her legs and bending them in front of her, making a bookstand out of her knees.

"She's only been here two days," Harry said grimly. "Just give her time." She'd passed him in the hallway this afternoon, and that's how Harry knew that she knew who he was. She'd been told everything, and she didn't like it. She'd given him this bone-chilling look of haughty amusement. It said I know what you're doing and I know you're a fool. She had plans to make his life miserable, and she'd practically come out and said so.

"Honestly, Evan, you're making it sound like it's doomsday," Ginny sighed, tilting her head back over the edge of the sofa cushion to look up at him. Harry just made a funny grimacing face and used his knee to push her head back down.

"Do your homework," he said.

"Okay, Dad."

What was he supposed to say? That this was his fault? That he could see in Dumbledore's face how much the headmaster hated this concession to the Ministry, how he would never have allowed this if he'd had the least option? That Cornelius Fudge, a paranoid old schemer, had been waiting for this moment forever, and having Harry show up here and need his cooperation to stay hidden, this was the

golden opportunity he'd been waiting for. That Harry had forced Dumbledore into the worst position possible. That if Harry had known what was going to happen, he might have just come out and declared himself to keep this from happening.

But they were stuck with Delores Umbridge inspecting Hogwarts at her whim, and Harry had found out too late to change it. Announcing himself now would do no good, so he ought to try to make the best of it. But something about Umbridge had struck him as so false that his skin crawled. He might be using a fake name, but he was no liar. His morals had suffered no loss of identity. A person like Umbridge only had morals so far as they were useful, or she wouldn't have agreed to this wretched coercion on Dumbledore.

"Tryouts are tomorrow," Ginny said suddenly.

"I know, I know. I've been practicing."

There was another thing Harry couldn't say to her. That he really didn't want to be the Keeper of the team at all, that he didn't think he'd do very well at it, that he hoped her brother Ron showed up and outperformed him and got his place on the team? He didn't want to miss out on playing Quidditch altogether, but he didn't want to play in a position he had no talent for, either. And he hated the animosity between Ron and Ginny, and he thought it would serve them both right if Ron got on the team.

Harry sighed. He'd read the same sentence out of The Standard Book of Spells four times, and nothing was sinking in. His mind was too agitated for quiet studying, especially when tryouts were so soon. He should be practicing. He made up his mind to make himself study another half an hour and then firecall Sirius to see if he could come over to the house and spar with him for a while. Remus always went out job-hunting all day (with little success), so he was probably too wiped out to be providing Sirius any entertainment this evening.

He finished the chapter he was reading, every once in while nudging Ginny with his knee just to see her glare at him and try to find her place on her page again. There were plenty of other students studying in here, but if any of them had noticed the silent back-and-

forth, they ignored it. Harry didn't know why he was so bent on annoying Ginny, except that almost everything she did annoyed him lately. He wasn't really interested in her at all anymore, but she was so set on him becoming Quidditch Keeper that Harry thought she was picturing his acceptance to the team sparking a romantic relationship between them.

All the more reason not to try out, really, but he was going to do it, anyway. He just enjoyed the sport too much to stay away. He'd figure out what to do with Ginny later.

But that problem solved itself, only minutes later.

"Evan. Evan?"

"Huh?" He was on the last paragraph of the chapter, and didn't pay much attention to the tone of her voice.

"What do think of me?"

"Think of you?" he muttered, irritated at the distraction while he was trying to finish.

She sighed. "Never mind."

He finished his reading quickly and looked up. "No, what? What do you mean?"

"You know, what kind of person am I? How would you describe my personality?"

Harry gaped at her. It would be only too easy to blurt out exactly what he'd been thinking a few minutes ago, and he tried to marshal his thoughts better.

"Why?" he asked, to buy himself time.

"I don't know," she said, sounding calm, leaning her head back and letting her book fall. "I just wondered. I don't really know what anybody thinks about me, and I'm curious."

“Well,” he said slowly. “Your popularity is no secret. It’s because you’re pretty and you’re fun to be around.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all, right?”

Harry gave her a very sober look. “Do you really, truly want to know what I think? You’re not afraid that you won’t like it?”

Ginny turned around so she could look at him head-on. “It doesn’t matter if I don’t like it, so long as it’s true.” There was some hard, raw emotion in her eyes. “No one’s ever told me before.”

Harry pressed his lips together, trying to decide if it was worth it. Then he decided, to hell with it, she asked. Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.

“I think you’re conflicted,” he said, his voice level and calm so that no one would think they were talking about anything important. “I think you’re horribly insecure about whether or not you’re pretty enough or cool enough, and you constantly belittle your peers to make yourself feel better. You don’t make friends with anyone who isn’t popular like you, or easy to get along with. Your act is so easy to see through, too. It’s obvious that you don’t form any very close relationships because you’re afraid people will get too close and see that you’re not as good as you pretend to be. The sad part is, you’re actually really cool when you’re not trying to be, and people would like you a lot better if you just let yourself be yourself without worrying if you were impressing anyone. You have so much kindness buried in you, and a great sense of humour, but all you ever use it for is to cover up how afraid you are that no one will love you. You don’t see that, because you’re too busy comparing yourself to everyone else to really see yourself at all.”

Ginny looked calm, but there in her eyes he could see a fire slowly building, getting bigger and bigger each moment.

“So,” she said, her voice trembling just the merest fraction. “Why do you even talk to me, if you find me so pathetic?”

“It took me a few weeks to see what an act you put on. I had this idea that if I encouraged you to be yourself, you’d stop being so cruel to others, but it hasn’t worked. I don’t know that you’ll ever change, but I still think you’re a lot of fun sometimes.”

That did it. The fire burst forth, and she slapped him so hard across the face that it made his eyes water. The cracking noise it made caused everyone in the room to look up at them with wide eyes. Harry ignored them all, rubbing his stinging cheek, and giving Ginny a level stare.

“You said you wanted to know.”

Ginny leapt to her feet, which flung her book nearly into the fireplace, and stormed out of the room, climbing through the portrait hole with the weight of dozens of eyes on her back. Harry picked up his book and hid himself behind it, not even remotely interested in speaking to any of his classmates right now. He could see Hermione across the room with some of the other girls, and he really did not want to meet her curious gaze. That was a friendship that he took a lot more seriously than whatever he had with Ginny. Which was, most likely, nothing from this point forward.

Harry felt relieved, rather than guilty. At least it was all out in the open. And Ginny was plenty tough enough to take it, anyway. He would miss having a running partner in the mornings to keep him motivated, probably. Maybe one of the guys would be interested.

It was probably less than ten minutes later that Ginny came back in, still looking upset. Her whole body was tense and her eyes were bright with emotion. She looked directly at Harry, and came directly to him. Harry stood up when he saw her coming, determined to take any further abuse on his feet.

Ginny practically ran the last few steps, flung her arms out wide, startling him into complete stillness, and threw herself on him. Her lips crushed against his with bruising force, and her arms twined behind his neck, pulling his head down to hers. Her teeth grazed his lip and for one wild second Harry thought she was going to bite him, but then she backed off, letting him go, just looking at him and

seeming oblivious to the number of other people who were also looking at him.

Harry coughed. "Uh, thank you?" he ventured.

Ginny took a step back, her breath gasping in and out and her eyes flaming with anger again. "That's it?" she hissed. When Harry couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't earn him something much more painful than a simple slap, she threw up her hands, uttered a wordless shriek, and stomped up the stairs to the girls' rooms.

Harry looked around, horrified, and met Ron's eye. Ron shrugged, just as mystified by his crazy sister as Harry was. Harry blew out a long breath when he realized he wasn't going to have to fight with Ron.

"Well, glad we got that out of the way," he said, trying to regain some humour.

There were a few muffled chuckles, and Harry decided now would be a good time to retreat. He gathered up his things and went to see if Dumbledore would let him use the fire in his office to call Sirius. Now he really needed to let off some steam.

Harry stood in the gathering dusk, thinking to himself that tryouts would be a much better idea over the weekend, when they could have them in daylight. But it made a sort of sense to be holding them with poor visibility, since it would truly test their skills. He held his broom in one hand and was slowly clenching and unclenching the other hand, trying not to reveal his nerves. Ron had turned out, as had a few other boys from other years that Harry didn't really know. There were no girls trying out for this position. There had been a few girls who had tried out as Chasers, but Alicia, Katie, and Angelina had been playing together too long and too well for any of them to have been any threat. It was the same with the Beater position—there was really no contest, after seeing Fred and George in action.

Harry was set to go last, the final person to try out for Keeper. This was good, since he had been wanting to watch the other boys, so that he'd know if there was someone better than him. He knew

Angelina was too good a Captain to take him on if he didn't perform better than they did, but he was worried that she'd be influenced by Fred. (Harry had finally caught on to the trick of telling the twins apart by which one of them spent more time with the Quidditch Captain.) He cast a look over to the established team, where they all sat in a row on the bleachers and watched the first boy attempt to block the balls sent his way.

"Hey, the hoops are behind you!" one of the twins jeered at the poor performance being turned out.

"Give him something hard, Angelina!"

Ginny was studiously ignoring him. He would see her eyes start to flick his way, then she would shake her head and refocus on the players. Harry knew she was angry with him, but he'd also observed how quiet she'd been all day. He didn't think she'd been talking to any of her girlfriends about it, which honestly made Harry feel a little sorry for her. What he'd said was true, and she didn't have any friends close enough to share it with. She'd tried to play herself off as a tough girl, and the only person she really might have been able to go to now was her brother, whom she'd chosen to alienate. No one had even turned out to contest her position on the team, but Ginny didn't seem all that enthused when Angelina had thrown an arm over her shoulders and congratulated her.

Harry suddenly didn't want to be just standing there, trying not to watch Ginny not watching him. He decided to take a few loops of the pitch and get warmed up on his broom before his turn came. Thinking a few minutes in the air was just what he needed to shake off how uncomfortable he'd been feeling, he mounted his broom and drifted up. He made sure to get high enough to stay out of everyone's way, and made a quick circle around, just enjoying the feeling of the air rushing by him. He went over to the opposite end of the pitch and wove through the goal hoops, warming up his brain to make the quick movements he thought he would need to stop the Quaffle. He spiraled down, around one of the poles the hoop was mounted on. He saw a bat, who'd come out a little early, flitting after some bug too small for him to see, and he amused himself by chasing the little animal. He laughed softly as he followed the darting movements,

making tight little turns and changes in altitude, over the stands and towards the Forbidden Forest. He turned around and headed back to the pitch, wondering if Ron had tried out yet.

The red-haired boy was just then rising up to the goal hoops, and Harry hovered for a moment to watch him. He was obviously nervous, he kept turning his head to look at his siblings in the stands. Harry felt bad for him, then. He was normally confident enough, managing the duties of being a prefect, getting along in his classes, and he didn't take crap from anybody about his love with chess. But trying to prove to his siblings that he was as good as they were, after all this time . . . it had to be tough.

"Yeah, come on, Weasley!" Harry shouted, clapping a few times before returning his hands to his broom to steady himself.

They all looked at him briefly, there was a nervous little giggle that ran around the group, then a few others started calling out as well, Fred and George among them. Harry felt better. He floated down to the ground, seeing that Ron would either perform or not according to his ability, but not due simply to nerves. He did well, Harry thought. He was no World Cup star, but good enough for the school team. Then it was Harry's turn.

He started to walk past Angelina to head for the goal hoops, but she stopped him.

"Rivers. I saw you chasing around the field a minute ago. What was that?"

"Getting warmed up," he shrugged.

"I want you to do something a little different," Angelina said, her eyes shining with some strange combination of excitement and trepidation. Harry didn't know what was going on, and he hated not knowing what was going on.

"Like what?" he muttered.

"Come on, Rivers, relax. Just do this for me."

Harry eyed her, then nodded sharply. Angelina grinned, bent over the box of balls at her feet, and rose again a moment later, sweeping her long braids back over her shoulder and holding out the Golden Snitch. Her fingers curved lightly over it, trapping it in her hand, and she looked at him with challenge. Harry sucked in a deep breath. If she meant what he thought she did . . .

Her fingers uncurled, and the winking little ball rose a few inches. Seeming to sense its freedom, it took off, darting up and sharply to the right almost too fast to see. Angelina just nodded at him.

“Bring it back.”

Feeling embarrassed for some inexplicable reason, and angry that she'd put him on the spot like this, Harry mounted back up and shot off in the direction he'd seen the ball take. He saw it only a moment later, already across the pitch and, oddly enough, taking the same direction as the bat he'd been chasing. He shot across the grass, flying low, and tried to swoop up sharply to grab it from underneath. It seemed to sense him coming and flitted off to his right. Harry followed.

He was struck in the shoulder, hard and painfully.

“Ow!” he shouted, being spun around and having to actually turn upside down to keep from simply pitching off the side of his broom. He righted himself, saw a dark object falling below him, and realized somebody had thrown a Bludger at him. Furious now, he found the Snitch again, now circling over the empty stands, and decided it wasn't getting away from him for another minute. He streaked to it, and saw it making a sharp upward movement, and quickly corrected his trajectory to intercept it. His fingers closed over it, felt the wings beating in his palm, and he streaked back to the watching crowd. He nearly ran into Angelina, but that was mostly on purpose. He dismounted his broom, thrust the ball into her waiting hands, and stood there with a scowl, waiting. Fred was standing next to her.

“Did you tell him to hit that Bludger at me?” Harry demanded.

Angelina just smiled. Fred was smiling, too. Harry turned around to see looks of awe and delight on most of the people around him. He folded his arms.

“What do you want?” he addressed the Captain roughly.

“For you to be our Seeker,” she shot back, nearly breathless.

Harry caught sight of Ginny. She stood there with a look of disbelief and outrage, her fists clenched, her face pale and pinched, her eyes fathomless. Staring not at Angelina, but at him, as if daring him to own up to his splendid performance. Harry couldn't stop himself. He met Angelina's eyes with a grin.

“Love to.”

The twins descended on him with exclamations of delight, and there was a lot of back-slapping for a couple of minutes when Angelina declared that Ron would also be joining the team as the Keeper. She herself bowed out of the congratulatory pile-up, slipping off to take Ginny by the arm and talk to her. Harry figured Angelina would be explaining that she had to take the best person for the job, but Harry wasn't sure how this would affect the girl. Would it be just the thing she needed to finally stamp out that spark of supercilious pride, or would it feed into her well-hidden insecurities enough to break her spirit? Harry would never have wished that. Ginny pulled away from Angelina with a sharp, angry remark, and rushed away from the pitch.

Angelina came strolling back, a look of regret on her face. “I honestly thought she'd be okay with it, since she saw how much better you are than she is. She knows it's my last year to try to defeat Slytherin.”

Harry shrugged. “She's still the reserve?”

Angelina nodded. “I hope so.”

“Well, anything could happen, right? She might still get to play.”

Angelina looked nearly panicked at the idea. "Don't start saying things like that before the season even starts, it'll be bad luck for the team! What would make you think such a thing?"

"Aw, it's nothing, I'm just saying," Harry said easily, but his mind was fixed on the person of High Inquisitor Delores Umbridge. If she was going to try to make him suffer, this would be the perfect place to start.

Harry showered and changed in the team locker room before he even went back into the castle proper. There were loads of students just heading up to their rooms from dinner in the Great Hall, so he was not alone on the trek back. He met up with Neville at the foot of the stairs, and Neville nodded to him.

"You tried out for the Quidditch team tonight?" he asked quietly.

Harry felt a smile creeping its way over his face in spite of himself. "Yeah. I've been made the Seeker."

"Congratulations, Evan," Neville said soberly, but he was frowning. "What about Ginny?"

Harry grimaced wordlessly.

Neville gave him a small smile that was meant to be encouraging, and started up the stairs, but they started to move, and Harry thought he'd wait until they stopped. He gave Neville a wave to say he'd see him in a minute, and Neville continued up, holding the railing for balance while the stone steps swung around with a groan. Harry quickly found a different route, leaving Neville to work his way back around to the proper side of the castle on his own.

He was joined by Hermione, who gave him a shy smile and said, "How'd it go?"

He shrugged. "It went well."

"Oh, don't tease me, Evan. Are you the Keeper?"

"No, Ron got it."

Hermione made a sympathetic face. "I'm sure you performed well, Evan, but I know Ron is fairly good, I saw him—"

"Oh, not to worry, Miss Hermione," he said. "I'm happy Ron got it. I myself landed the Seeker position."

They were approaching the entrance to their dormitory, and there were a few others going in just ahead of them. Hermione lowered her voice, which was already in danger of being lost, making Harry strain to hear her.

"Seeker? Isn't that, er, doesn't Ginny play that position?"

Harry shrugged again. "She used to. Now I do." He was feeling worse about it, now that he'd had a few minutes to let his excitement cool.

"Oh, dear," Hermione said softly, thinking of the implications. Then, "What's wrong with your lip?"

Harry had been biting it. "Nothing," he said cheerfully, and held the portrait hole open for her to climb through. When they got inside, they found a group of students clustered around the announcements board. Harry quickly joined them, sliding up alongside Neville and saying,

"Sorry about that, I just hate being on the stairs when they're moving."

Neville just nodded, looking like he wasn't really hearing what Harry was saying. Harry directed his attention to the board. A new paper hung there which spelled out the duties of the Hogwarts High Inquisitor, and Harry felt the blood roaring in his ears. The others' voices came to him as though from a great distance.

"Inspections?"

"Can she do that?"

"D'you think Snape'll make her drink poison?"

"I can't believe Dumbledore went for this."

"What if the teachers don't pass the inspections? I'd be right glad to see Snape go, but what about McGonagall or something?"

"McGonagall will be fine, mate, don't worry, she's ten times tougher than that pink-suited lunatic."

A hand touched his arm, making him jump.

"Evan?"

It was Hermione. She sounded worried.

Harry shook his head, inexplicably wearied by this. She was going to sit in on Sirius' class and watch him teach, and if she didn't like what she saw, she could fire him. It was only a matter of days until Sirius was out of a job. He and Remus could keep each other company, he thought with a dizzy sort of amusement.

"Evan, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, managing to give her a smile. The smile fell away the instant his eyes turned back to the pale pink sheet pinned to the board.

"I think this is awful," Hermione whispered.

Neville was standing there with his lips pressed together until they were white.

Harry couldn't take it. "I'm going to bed."

A/N: See, told you I'd make up for being late! Three days in a row!

Love you guys!

Faren

Chapter Nine

They trickled in slowly, one by one, so the number of them crept up on you and surprised you. One minute, it was just Harry, Sirius, and Remus moving around the kitchen, making coffee and rummaging through the pantry to find a few packets of shortbread biscuits (Kreacher had been directed upstairs, where he was to remain for the evening). Then Harry looked up and was surrounded by people, and for a moment, his breath caught and his heart thumped. He'd known they were coming in, heard them arriving as he fiddled with the coffee machine, and marked each individual presence, but he hadn't really counted them up mentally. He hadn't bothered, knowing that this house was one of the safest places in Britain, for now, and the people who were arriving were all on their side.

But faced by so many people, so closely packed together when he hadn't expected it, Harry felt an instant flash of fear and shifted his body to lower his centre of gravity and bring his arms in closer to his sides. People gave him puzzled looks, and he smiled and stood up straight, feeling foolish. He hoped he wasn't going to spend his entire life acting like that, though he wasn't sure how he would break the habit. Miguel had been asked to make him paranoid, and so he was. Sirius walked past him very deliberately on his way to the table, letting his hand brush over Harry's shoulder, letting him know that he had Sirius' sympathy. He was feeling a little overcrowded, as well.

There was a witch with a heart-shaped face and bright purple hair talking to Professor McGonagall, and there was a big, handsome Black man talking quietly to a couple, the man in a tatty cardigan and the woman in a hand-knit sweater, both red-haired. Professor Snape was over in the corner, speaking to no one and watching them all with slick dark eyes. Of course, the feeling over overcrowding was probably mostly due to the immense mountain of a man who sat up against the wall, the furthest out of the way that he could get, which was not far, all things considered. He had a wild head of hair and a bushy beard that could hide small children. Remus had greeted him very gladly, so Harry knew that this was Rubeus Hagrid, returned at last from wherever he'd been. He hoped his Care of Magical Creatures class wasn't too disappointed.

Harry set a carafe of coffee on the table and stepped back again, fighting feelings of claustrophobia. Then the meeting began, with absolutely no ado whatsoever. It began with a very frightening-looking old man in the corner shouting, "Everybody, sit down and quiet! We have a lot to cover!"

Everybody did. Harry didn't blame them. Looking at the grizzled, gnarled old man, it was easy to see why they were intimidated. The wooden leg with the clawed foot poking out from under his trousers, the missing chunks of face, and to top it all off, a whirring, electric blue, magical eyeball that was constantly spinning off in new directions to see something only it could see. Harry sat down and kept quiet, himself.

"For any of you don't know, which isn't likely, I'm Alastor Moody. Dumbledore asked me to head up this first meeting, as he's a bit preoccupied with that Ministry witch trying to take over the school. You'll notice we're a bit short on members tonight—"

We are? Harry thought wildly, though he kept it to himself. He hadn't known there were so many people already formed into a cohesive unit. It was a nice surprise.

"—but there's a reason for that. Not every member of the Order was invited to this one. Only those of you that Dumbledore and I agree we can trust completely." Harry knew that each person's name had been run by Sirius as well before being added to the list, but to explain that would be to reveal the purpose of the meeting too early for proper dramatic effect. Merlin, couldn't they just stand up and introduce themselves? Harry hated this sort of stage drama. "We've got some information that's going to take you by surprise, and when you know it, you'll understand why we're keeping it close tonight."

The magical eyeball kept spinning around to look at many things, but Mr. Moody's real eyeball fixed on Snape, over in the corner of the room. "We don't all know each other, so let's make the introductions, shall we? We'll start with you, Professor Snape."

Snape stood up slowly, sneering at the meeting's leader. "You've almost introduced me already. Severus Snape, Potions master at Hogwarts." Without another word, he sat down again, still looking sly and brooding. Harry thought to himself that he really must learn that trick. He wished he could look dark and intimidating at any time.

The next person was the gigantic man with the unkempt hair. He didn't bother standing. "Well, you all oughter know me by now, I guess. Gamekeeper and professor of the Care of Magical Creatures class at Hogwarts, mostly jus' go by Hagrid. Bin aroun' long eno' to know you all—'cept our new professor, o' course," he added as almost an afterthought, nodding at Sirius.

"It's good to have you back," Professor McGonagall said warmly. "I'm sure we're all eager for your report."

"We'll get to it, we'll get to it," Hagrid rumbled amiably, and turned his attention to his coffee, which had been served to him in a mug that Harry had had to cast an Engorgio spell on to make it large enough for him.

Professor McGonagall, already drawing attention by conversing with Hagrid, went next. "Minerva McGonagall, as I'm sure everyone here knows." That was all she said, which was plenty, Harry thought with amusement. Nearly everyone in the room had probably had her as their Transfiguration professor at one point, and Harry had been told that she'd fought Voldemort the first time around, about sixteen years ago.

The next person to stand was the red-haired man, looking very nervous. "Arthur Weasley, and this is my wife Molly. I think we're here because we've been very vocal about believing You-Know-Who has returned. I think you all must have heard about what happened to our sons a few years ago, and I've been listening to what Dumbledore has to say since then." This little speech appeared to make him very uncomfortable, and he sat down again quickly, squeezing his wife's hand under the table. Harry eyed him with frank interest. The patriarch of the infamous Weasley clan, was it? These two had raised some of the more interesting people Harry had met in his life—and that was saying a lot.

The man that the Weasleys had been talking to before the meeting was next. "My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt. I am one of the Aurors that Moody has been talking to recently. The things we have been seeing . . ." His eyes went far away for a moment. "I, too, believe that You-Know-Who has returned."

The younger woman with the purple hair stood up eagerly, knocking over her coffee cup as she did so. "Oh, bother," she muttered with a frown, reaching to right the cup while the coffee spread over the table. Her face reddened with embarrassment, and her hair began to darken toward red, as well. Harry's eyes widened, fascinated by this bit of magic. How did she do that?

Remus stepped forward, wand out, and quickly took care of the mess.

"Thank you," she said, flashing him a brilliant grin, her hair flaring into an even more intense shade of purple

"You're welcome," he murmured in return, stepping back with eyes slightly awestruck. He leaned against the counter beside Harry and Sirius again, looking lost. Harry gave Sirius a surreptitious glance, wiggling his eyebrows and indicating Remus, and Sirius graced him with nothing more than a brief smile. He was obviously feeling the strain of what they were planning to do.

"I'm Tonks," the young woman said, her eyes challenging them all to say different. "Just Tonks. And I'm like Shacklebolt, here, I've been listening to Moody and I know what's going on. And I'm ready to do something about it, before it gets worse."

There were a few murmurs and nods around the room, agreeing with her. She smiled again, and nodded emphatically, then returned to her seat with a careful eye on her coffee.

"Remus Lupin," the man at Harry's side said almost casually. "I think most of you know me already anyway, as I taught a year at Hogwarts, but you recall I was in the papers this past summer because I caught Peter Pettigrew." He didn't explain his reasons for being here. He didn't have to. He turned to Harry as though that were his cue. Harry

looked into Alastor Moody's good eye, and saw it gleaming. Here we go.

"I'm Harry Potter," he said plainly.

A stifled gasp. A few looks of complete astonishment, then some weak chuckling, as though to appease him. Hagrid gave him a stern look.

"Here now, you're the new professor's son, aren't ye? Wot's your name, again?"

Harry sighed, and lifted the fringe of his hair. He'd forgone makeup this evening, and he displayed the scar emblazoned on his forehead, turning slowly so they could all see.

"No, I'm really Harry Potter. Cursed scar, dead parents, the whole bit. And as I'm sure you're all realizing now, this," he slapped a hand sharply on Sirius' shoulder, "is Sirius Black. I'm surprised more of you didn't recognise him already. We're back, by the way."

There were dumbfounded looks from Mr. Weasley, Hagrid, and the two Aurors. The professors already knew, as did Moody, who spoke up again.

"Now you all know why we didn't invite the whole Order to this one, eh? We'd like to keep this quiet for now."

There was a moment of silence, then Harry thought he'd better finish the story.

"It's not just rumours about Voldemort, you know." They all gasped or winced, and Harry knew it was because he said Voldemort's name. Well, the man was carrying Harry's blood through his veins, he ought to be able to call him whatever he liked. "I know he's back, and back in his own body, because I was there. I saw it." They were all staring at him, which was not exactly what he wanted, but he soldiered on. "Pettigrew got into the house on the night we came back, and managed to trick me into touching a Portkey, which took me to the graveyard where Voldemort's father is buried. They used the bones,

and my blood, and the hand of one of his servants., to give Voldemort a body. I escaped, obviously, but not before I was forced into doing my part to resurrect him. So, yeah, he's back for sure."

Harry was impressed with the intellect of the people in the room. Almost immediately, they got over their shock and began asking the pertinent questions.

"If he knows you're here, why are you hiding?" asked Tonks.

"And how long do you expect to be able to do so?" added Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"If Pettigrew's captured, Dumbledore must ha' set this up with the Ministry, eh?" Hagrid said, his face furrowed as he realized what was going on at the school.

"I can't believe You-Know-Who hasn't done something to out you already," Arthur Weasley said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"All right, settle down, settle down," Moody barked out. He looked back and forth between Sirius and Harry, wondering which of them was planning to answer the questions. Sirius took charge.

"Listen. When I escaped from Azkaban, I had no plan. I know you're all wondering what's been going on the past seven years, so let's start with that. I got out only thinking that I had to prove I was innocent, and catch Peter. I went to find Harry first, and when I found him, he was in a miserable home with some miserable Muggles who were doing a piss-poor job of raising him. I'm his godfather, so I reckoned it was up to me to change that. I took him, and I decided that if I planned to keep him, we'd better go somewhere they didn't know us, so that's what we did. There was no grand scheme. It was just Harry and I, working and going to school like everybody else. But lately, we've been hearing things from back home, stories like what happened to Mr. Weasley's sons, and we knew it was time to return. We knew that if Voldemort was coming back, he wasn't going to rest until he found us, anyway."

“Why don’t you declare yourselves? If he already knows you’re here, I mean,” Tonks asked.

“Voldemort knowing we’ve returned isn’t the same as everyone knowing we’ve returned,” Sirius explained calmly. “We didn’t know how we’d be received, and we didn’t want a lot of media attention, so we thought it was best to ease into this. With us laying low at Hogwarts, we’re not such an open target as we’d be otherwise. We didn’t know if anyone would be ready to believe who we are and why we’re here.”

“Why are you here?”

Harry didn’t know who asked the question first, but it was repeated around the room several times. He took the answer himself, though Sirius was waiting to answer it.

“Because I am the real Boy-Who-Lived,” he said softly. “I know that Neville Longbottom has filled that role, but with Pettigrew’s arrest over the summer, it’s become obvious to everyone that he isn’t, since I’m still alive. There’s more to being that person than just having survived an attack by Voldemort. A lot more to it. There’s all the reasons that the attack took place, and the reasons that I survived. I can’t explain it all to you now, because even I don’t know everything yet. But trust me when I say that Voldemort chose me as his enemy, not Neville, and I have to be here to face him because Voldemort won’t stop until he finds me and has his chance to finish what he started when I was an infant.”

They were all gawping at him. Harry felt annoyed by it, even though he understood why they might do so. If he’d known the real reason, that they were simply dumbfounded by a boy of his years with such poise and absolute certainty about what he was saying, then he likely would have been embarrassed instead.

“Dumbledore will likely fill you all in on this a lot more than we can, since he’s got a much better grasp of the whole scope of things,” Sirius said, rescuing Harry. “He’s the only one of us that knows the full story, beginning to end. I know he plans to be at the next meeting so that he can answer some of your questions. For this meeting, we

just needed to be sure you knew we were here, and what our goals are for the next few months. To wit, we want to be normal. We need some time to adjust to this country and the role that Harry will have to fill. We also need to be looking out for Harry's future, hence that he's come back to Hogwarts in time to revise for his OWL exams. I don't need to stress to you the importance of absolute secrecy. Our identity cannot be known by anyone not currently in this room, other than Dumbledore. We must be known, for now, as John and Evan Rivers. Agreed?"

They all murmured their assent, some looking very thoughtful.

Tonks turned her eyes on Harry and set him with a look that made him more certain of her support than anyone else in this room. "Agreed," she said firmly. Soberly. Her twinkling eyes had gone still and steady. Next to Harry, Remus was holding his breath.

"Now, I hardly need to tell you that we have more plans to fight Voldemort, besides what Harry will be doing," Sirius said. "There is much more that we want to accomplish. On that note, I turn things over to my esteemed colleague, Professor Snape."

One could hardly miss the sarcasm, as it was thick and grossly sweet enough to spread over a cake as frosting. Snape stood up, his carriage stiff and distant.

"Thank you," he sneered, his act of civility no better. "Let us get the unpleasant part out of the way early, shall we?" he asked, his voice dry with the knowledge of what was probably going through the heads of his audience. "You are remembering what happened fourteen years ago correctly, if not completely. I was a follower of the Dark Lord then. It was not until the very end of the war that I came to Dumbledore and turned to your side. I was able to act as a spy until the night that the Dark Lord attacked the Potter family and was overcome by Harry." His fathomless dark eyes cut to Harry and looked at him with one of the strangest expressions Harry had ever seen. He wished he was a better Legilimens, that he could see what was hiding behind Snape's eyes.

"We all know that," Sirius interrupted, looking cross. He obviously had no patience for any of Snape's attempts at drama.

"I didn't," Shacklebolt said softly, looking at nothing but his coffee cup, challenging the attitude at work without challenging either of the people involved. Nicely done, Harry thought.

"What you may not know," Snape continued, his face sour, "is that I had received the Dark Lord's Mark." His right hand covered his left forearm, but he left the arm enfolded in the sleeve of his robes and did not show it to them. "When he returned a few months ago, he called me, as he called all of his followers. At Dumbledore's request, I went to him, to pretend to rejoin his cause, so that I could continue to act as a spy for the Order. You need not take the word of a boy whom you do not know. I have seen the Dark Lord, risen again, more than once. I am an accomplished Occlumens, probably the only person who could stand before him without his realising my true loyalties. I can profess to be one of his Death Eaters, and carry reports back to you on their activities, and feed false information to them when I can. He will never suspect."

Despite Snape's decidedly prideful outlook on his abilities (which were, all things considered, perfectly worthy of such conceit), Harry felt very, very foolish, and very, very young. To think that everyone in this room would be willing to automatically believe him, without knowing him at all. To never wonder about what Snape's role in the Order was, to never realise how much more danger Snape had put himself in than Harry was likely to be in for a long time to come. He didn't fight the surprise and respect that showed in his eyes when he looked at his professor, and the sneer that the other man looked at him with fell away as he met Harry's eyes. In fact, everyone in the room was looking at him with some combination of awe, respect, and regret. Harry wondered if he'd seen anyone look at him with anything other than anger or mild fear, the way his students did. Or contempt, the way Harry's own father had.

Snape looked away from them all, his eyes focused on the cheery curtains that hung in the kitchen window. "Needless to say, the Dark Lord has questioned me about Black and Potter. He knows that I am in a position to find out a great deal of information from Dumbledore. I

have told him that on this topic, Dumbledore will not trust me, nor trust anyone. I told him that I suspect the new professor and his son to be Black and Potter, as one who knew they were in the country would have to be a colossal idiot not to think so, but I told him that Dumbledore will not confirm it. I have counselled taking no action until we better understand what the plan is. I will continue to do so until it is no longer wise to stall, then we will come up with a new plan. Obviously, the boy is not ready to face the Dark Lord yet. It is my task to hold the Dark Lord at bay and to give you all the information I can so that he becomes ready quickly.”

Without another word, Snape took his seat. He still looked stiff and formal, with eyes that were black pools of mistrust and isolation. Maybe it made his job easier, Harry thought. God knew, he needed whatever he could get to make it easier.

Hagrid harrumphed, banging his empty coffee mug down on the scarred wooden table and leaning forward. “Guess it’ll be my turn to report, then. Let me tell you what I’ve bin discussin’ wi’ the giants . . .”

After the meeting, Harry felt wretched and exhausted. They’d listened to Hagrid’s report (which was not a hopeful one) and discussed it a bit, but then the topic had fallen again to Harry and what it was about being the Boy-Who-Lived that was so important. Yes, he had survived the Killing Curse, but now it was time to talk about why Voldemort had cast it that night. They’d only danced around the edges of that one, really, knowing that Dumbledore wanted the chance to explain it in person. They simply said that Voldemort believed he and Harry were destined to meet again. He thought his only option was to kill Harry. And Harry didn’t plan to die. He thought he’d made that pretty clear to everyone when he’d said, “I don’t plan to die.” That was when they all looked at him as though he’d sprouted another head.

Then the conversation had turned to Neville Longbottom. They had all been very understanding of the idea that if Harry was dead, Voldemort’s destined enemy had to be somebody. They trusted that Dumbledore had good reasons for believing Neville was that somebody. But they agreed that the general public, after finding out this summer that they had, in effect if not intent, been lied to, would

not be so keen on receiving another boy. Even if he was the original. If Voldemort couldn't come back from the dead, it would be hard to allow Harry to do so. But even if the world at large wasn't ready to know, somebody had to break the news to Neville that he wasn't the one.

Harry had been a little bit disgusted. "He's not an idiot, I imagine he knows that just as well as the entire rest of Britain."

"But, as he's been so involved in this up till now, thought for so long that he had a particular purpose for his life, it ought to be explained to him that you're back to fill that role," Professor McGonagall had said. There was a very private look of discontent on her face, as if she were upset about something only she knew about.

Harry had looked at her, projecting a calm he did not feel. "That's for me to do," he had said quietly. There had been another one of those uncomfortable silences, then the meeting had pretty much broken up.

A few people stayed, chatting here and there. Hagrid had put a huge hand on Harry's shoulder and stared at him, tears shining in his eyes, and said gruffly that he looked a lot like his father. He said it was him who'd taken Harry to his aunt and uncle's home that night of destruction, when his parents had been murdered. Seeing that there was some incongruous softness in the huge man, Harry wondered if Hagrid had cried when he'd heard Harry was dead. Tonks (just Tonks, she confirmed when Harry asked) had shaken his hand and welcomed him home and asked him how he liked Hogwarts. She herself had only graduated a few years ago.

Arthur Weasley had watched him for a minute, his expression belying him. He wanted to talk to Harry about something, but he didn't think it was the right time. Or he knew he needed to, but he didn't want to. Either way, he turned after a moment and he and his wife went home. Harry felt a slightly sick sensation, thinking that Ginny or one of her brothers had written home about the new student at school, and that Mr. Weasley was realising Harry Potter was the boy who had stolen Ginny's place on the Quidditch team and (as she'd probably told it) strung the girl along and dumped her. He so did not need to deal with an irate father right now.

Now Harry lay upstairs on the bed in his room in the house, cooling off. By unspoken consent, Remus had taken care of cleaning up the kitchen so that Sirius and Harry could go in their practice room and let off some steam. Sirius had casually mentioned that he'd been teaching Remus a bit, despite his own less-than-masterful knowledge of the art, and Remus had learned all the basic forms. They'd agreed that Remus would do some sparring with them from now on. But for tonight, the two of them just silently agreed to vent on each other. Harry lay on his bed and felt the beginnings of several bad bruises on his shins, one on his ribs on the right side, and sore knuckles on his left hand. But that was okay, since he'd done the same to Sirius' forearms, his cheek, and both sides of his ribcage.

He lay there, waiting for Sirius to get out of the shower, and take him back to school. He waited, knowing that when he got back, he had to talk to Neville. He couldn't put it off any longer, and he didn't think he wanted to. It was time to have truth; truth between him, whatever he was, and the hollow-eyed boy whose shoulders were altogether too narrow for their impossible burden.

Sirius knocked on the door and came in.

"You all right, kiddo?"

Harry shrugged listlessly. "I don't know what I'm going to say," he confessed.

"You're not planning to do it tonight, are you?" Sirius asked in disbelief.

Harry shook his head. "No, he'll probably be asleep by now, anyway. But as soon as possible. As soon as that Umbridge woman isn't around. It's time."

Sirius shook his head, grimacing. "Dumbledore handled it wrong," he said. "He shouldn't have given Neville the responsibility until he was sure."

"He was sure," Harry said dully. "I was dead, the prophecy was real, and Neville fit the bill. He did what he had to do to make sure that Neville wouldn't go down without a fight. It's nobody's fault. It just sucks for all of us."

Sirius sighed, and held out a hand to pull Harry up off the bed. "Yeah, I guess it does. You want me to be there when you talk?"

"No," Harry said firmly, allowing Sirius to drag him up. "No, it's something I have to do. I'm the one who ran off and left him with the mess in the first place."

Sirius stared at him. "Harry, you were eight years old and you didn't know he existed."

Harry sighed. "I know it makes no logical sense for me to feel guilty. So why do I?"

"Because somebody has to," Sirius said, running an affectionate hand through Harry's hair. "Don't worry, I think Dumbledore has that angle covered."

Harry scowled at Sirius through his mussed-up hair and grabbed hold of him so they could Apparate back to outer edge of the Hogwarts wards. His hair didn't need any help looking like a bird's nest, and he didn't know why people were always doing that.

"Hey, Neville," Harry said casually when they met each other on the stairs up to the tower after dinner.

"Oh, hullo, Evan," Neville replied, surprised as always that anyone was taking notice of him beyond a pitying sideways glance.

"I need to talk to you. Can we go somewhere private?" Harry wasn't worried about keeping Neville from bed. It was practical Astronomy night, no one would be going to bed for hours yet.

"Sure, I guess," Neville said, letting Harry lead him off their usual path and toward an empty classroom. Harry noted with grim amusement that Neville drew his wand as he followed his classmate away from

everyone into an area that wasn't being used. He would have done the same thing. Looked like they'd both been trained too well in the art of paranoia.

"I reckon this will do," Harry said, using a simple Alohamora spell to unlock the empty classroom door. They obviously didn't think anyone was very interested in being in the classrooms when they didn't have to be.

"What's going on, Evan?" Neville said in a low voice, fingers playing lightly over his wand.

Harry very deliberately set his wand out on one of the desk tops, in plain sight. "I need to talk to you, like I said."

Neville relaxed when Harry let go of his wand, but not enough to put his own away. "Okay. What about?"

Harry bit his lip and tried to think. He'd been trying to think for two days, whenever he wasn't being glared at by an ugly woman in gaudy pink clothing in the hallway. Professor inspections were set to begin next week.

"Are you all right?" Neville asked more softly.

Harry shrugged. "No, I guess not. The thing is, it's time for me to tell you who I really am, and I know it's going to be difficult."

"Who you really are?" Neville's grip tightened on his wand again, and he raised it fractionally, not pointing it at Harry, but definitely ready to do so. A strange look crossed his features. "I think I knew you were more than you said you were, you and your father both. But what do you mean? What is this all about, and why me?"

"Good questions," Harry said with a sigh. "Can you please put your wand down?"

Neville frowned.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, here," he said, feeling a little annoyed now.

"If I don't know who you are, how do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Good point. Fine, point the thing at me, but listen to me because this is serious." Harry never knew when he was running out of patience until the moment he slipped over the edge. He'd have to work on that in the future. "Since I'm not who I say I am, then you have to ask yourself, why have I been hiding?"

"I was just asking that, in fact."

"I was ready to come back to England, but not ready for all the attention. That's why."

Neville's face was confused and a little dangerous, what with his wand held at the ready, but Harry saw the moment when he realised the truth. His face twisted, crumbled, drew inward, and he dropped his wand, gasping for breath. He put one hand to his stomach as though it hurt, and he stared at Harry through a fall of hair across one eye.

"You're him, then, aren't you?" he asked in a high, strained voice. "You're Potter."

Harry nodded.

"You're the real one. The person the prophecy was talking about. I think I always knew it wasn't me, but I didn't think . . ." Neville trailed off. "What do you want from me?"

"Me?" Harry asked in confusion. "I don't want anything."

"Then why . . .?"

"I just thought you deserved to know. I wasn't planning on waiting for permission to tell you, but I found out a couple of days ago that the whole Order of the Phoenix agrees with me. I just was trying to think of some way to let you know without it being . . . well, like this. I didn't mean for it to be so uncomfortable."

Neville sat down at one of the desks, looking as stunned and miserable as he felt. The skin around his gaunt cheeks and haunted eyes had grown pale. "I suppose you want me to, I don't know, formally renounce it or something? Acknowledge you?"

Harry snorted with disgust. "I'm not your lord or anything. I don't even want this, but I'm stuck with it. I'm not going to tell anyone else, at least not for now. You're the only student who's going to know." His voice grew quieter. "I don't want to humiliate you."

Neville gripped the desk with his hands until the knuckles were white. "You're too late for that. Everyone knows I'm a joke."

"Stop that," Harry said sharply. They were both quiet for a minute, not looking at each other. Then Harry asked, "what did you mean, that you always knew it wasn't you? Do you sense the prophecy or something?" He surprised himself by the question. He hadn't even known it was in his head to ask, especially as he always told himself he didn't believe in prophecy. His heart pounded at the idea of what Neville would answer.

"No," Neville said.

Harry felt relief pour over him, tinged with a touch of regret he did not want to analyse. That one word was vindication, but somehow made him feel more lost in the middle of this mess than ever.

"It's just that I always knew I wasn't good enough at this to be the right one. I've never been what Dumbledore wanted, and I never thought I could live up to it. I'm glad you're here, you know. I know I don't look it. But somebody stronger than me has to do it."

"What?" Harry hissed. Anger loomed up large in him, almost overwhelming. What he'd said to Dumbledore about moping came back to him, and he was angry with Neville for the way he'd been behaving. "What kind of shit is that?"

Neville shrugged. "It's true."

Harry didn't think and he honestly thought his brain blacked out for a minute. He was standing there staring at Neville in rage, then he was suddenly wincing and clutching his hand into a fist from the force of the open-palmed blow he'd delivered to Neville's head that made tears smart in the other boy's eyes.

"I can't believe you're spouting that kind of bullshit," Harry shouted at him. "I really can't! Dumbledore would have taught you better than that. I've only known him for a few months, and even I know that. It's not about being good enough to stand up to him, nobody's that good, especially nobody our age! It has nothing to do with some kind of freakish talent to overwhelm one of the most powerful wizards in the world. If that were the case, nobody would be fighting, nobody at all, and he would have won twenty years ago! You don't stand up for what's right because you're strong enough to fight the bad guy, you do it because it is right. Where the hell do you get off, saying you're stepping down from the fight just because I showed up? I'm not your pass to walk away with a clear conscience. If you walk away, it's because you don't have the balls to stay."

"What are you talking about?" Neville stammered.

"I just said that I was Harry Potter, I never said, now stand aside and watch the master at work. I don't know what I'm doing, anymore than you do. I can't fight Voldemort! At least, I can't do it alone, and I need you on my side. You know better than most what it really takes to stand up to him, and I thought you had that. I thought you were willing, and ready, to do that. That's what you made your entire life about. Are you really going to just walk away from everything you believed you were meant to do, just because somebody else is here to do it, as well?"

"What about the prophecy?"

"Prophecy? Fuck prophecy! I don't believe any of that mystical Divination crap is worth a steaming pile of thestral dung, and I'm not here because I was prophesied to be. I'm here because Voldemort wants me, and he'll hurt innocent people to get to me. I'm here to stop him from hurting people, because it's the right thing to do. Staying away when I know he's looking for me is nothing but

cowardice, and I won't have the blood of innocent people on my head because of cowardice. What I'm saying, Neville, is that it doesn't matter if you're the one named in that prophecy. If you think what Voldemort is doing is wrong, then you're just as responsible for putting an end to it as I am. You found out about me two years ago, so it's about time you figured out what you want to do with your life."

Unwilling to stand there looking at Neville's tortured, hurt expression for a moment longer, unable to muster up the compassion to acknowledge the way he kept his arm wrapped around his middle as though to hold himself together, Harry strode out of the room. He was fairly sure he'd just thrown a temper tantrum, but by all that lived, he couldn't stomach that kind of cowardly retreat. Neville was either on the right side, or he wasn't. Neville was the only one that could make that choice, and Harry could only hope he chose based on his own morals and not whether or not he was covered under the parameters of that ridiculous prophecy.

Harry strode down the hallway in a sort of haze, wanting nothing more than to get upstairs, get his Astronomy homework, and get back out of their rooms. He couldn't handle facing Neville again tonight.

He turned a corner and nearly collided with someone who was coming from the other side. He spun quickly on the ball of one foot, pivoting to the side and brushing his bruised side against the woman's arm, which was clad in a silky pink blouse—oh. Oh, no. It was her.

"Mr. Rivers, isn't it?" she said sweetly.

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered, knowing full well that she knew it wasn't Mr. Rivers at all.

"You are causing a hazard in this corridor. May I ask to where you are rushing off so quickly?"

"To finish my homework, ma'am."

"That is admirable, Mr. Rivers, but you were creating a dangerous situation, nonetheless."

Harry wasn't about to argue. He looked down at his feet, hoping that his already-upset state wouldn't make him mouth off to her.

"If I see you behaving this way again, it will be detention."

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled, astonished when she walked away, her heels clacking importantly on the stone floor.

Amazed to be getting off so lightly, he dashed upstairs, grabbed his homework, and hurried back out to sit in the library and study. Narrowly escaping detention wasn't quite enough to brighten his night, and he fairly stalked down the hallways, angry with what, he hardly knew. He headed for the library despite the fact that most of his homework was done. He went there hoping for nothing more than to avoid seeing Neville. But when he saw Hermione sitting at a table with her own homework spread out around her, it brought a smile to his face at last. He didn't think he'd smiled in three days, and Merlin knew he needed to see something that made him happy. He approached her table, trying to release the tension singing through his body so he wouldn't scare her.

"Evening, Miss Hermione," he drawled.

"Hi, Evan. You can sit down, if you want."

He did, and set his homework out with carefully controlled hands. At least he wasn't trembling with all his emotions anymore.

"Are you mad about something, Evan?"

He looked up. Her head was tilted just a bit to one side, looking at him with compassionate concern, a quill poised just above the paper in front of her. She had a small inkstain on her chin.

"No, Miss Hermione," he smiled. "I'm fine."

hapter Ten

"I thought you and Longbottom were getting to be friends, Evan."

Harry ignored the voice and continued reading from his Astronomy book. They were supposed to be studying, and studying quietly. He didn't relish the idea of a run-in with the formidable Madam Pince. Nor did he really want to talk about this.

"I'm not saying you have great taste in friends or anything, because, well, you're in Gryffindor and you spent all your time with Miss High-and-Mighty, but what happened? You and Longbottom have a lover's tiff?"

"I thought your father forced you to be friends with him, Draco." He didn't want to respond, but he knew Draco would harass him until he did.

"Not since we found out that he's completely useless. That Potter boy is alive somewhere, so I'm off the hook."

He sounded so proud of himself for that. Harry was disgusted. "I can't blame you, you didn't pick him out as a friend," was all he said.

"Yeah, but you did," Draco said. "I don't know why."

"My poor taste in friendship is nothing to be talking about, we're sitting here in the library together, aren't we?"

There was a gleam in Draco's eye that Harry didn't like. There were a lot of things about Draco that he didn't like. He'd hoped that sticking this out would make Draco a better person, or make himself more forgiving, but neither of those things seemed to be happening. All it was doing was making his roommates suspicious of his motives, while Draco's house seemed to think it was a brilliant job of spying on the enemy. There was the difference in their houses, plain enough. And that look in Draco's eyes made Harry feel like Draco was planning to abandon this friendship as easily as he'd walked away from Neville Longbottom (who, it was true, had been avoiding him like a spurned lover since Harry had confessed his identity).

What Draco said was, "Yeah, but Hermione High-and-Mighty Granger? Urgh."

He certainly knew how to push Harry's buttons. Harry had to concede that even while he found himself responding when he knew he shouldn't, knew that Draco was just trying to wind him up to amuse himself.

"I thought we came to the library to do Astronomy homework, not to get in fights or psychoanalyse my choice in friends," Harry said sharply, standing up and gathering his work into a pile. "Since you obviously came here for something else, I'm going back to my common room to do my homework with somebody else."

Draco's eye still carried that gleam, but it had changed somehow. It wasn't just humour or pride, it was a sort of cynicism and melancholy. "I thought you'd be as quick to leave as I was," he murmured.

Harry didn't know what he meant for a moment, but it came to him while he stood there, his mouth opening and closing like a dying fish while he tried to come up with a response. Draco was trying to drive him off. He was testing Harry's loyalty. He wanted to see just how far Harry was willing to take this. And Harry couldn't let him win, he just couldn't.

He sat back down, staring back at the other boy in an open challenge. "Never mind. Who else would I study with, Seamus? He hates Astronomy."

This was probably a mistake, Harry thought. He should just allow Draco to think he was a jerk, and drop the friendship while he could. After all, what really held them together but sheer stubbornness? Their so-called friendship was nothing more than an experiment in house rivalry, and Harry would be smart to call it quits while he had this perfect exit in front of him. But what would it do to his reputation? What would Hermione think, if he'd lost what he'd begun with Draco on top of Ginny and Neville?

Besides, he thought while he jovially informed Draco that he'd gotten the fourth question wrong and he could bloody well figure it out himself instead of asking one of his Slytherin underlings, maybe a connection to the Malfoys would come in handy someday. Maybe.

While the class was breaking up and heading back to the castle, Harry found himself pushed up against Inquisitor Umbridge. His anger had been slowly simmering all throughout the class. It wasn't out of loyalty to Professor Hagrid, not especially. It was just a moral problem with the way she conducted herself. If she was actually trying to serve this school and its students by providing accountability, then she ought to act accordingly. Her "inspection" of the Care of Magical Creatures class made it abundantly clear that she had her own agenda, as if that wasn't clear enough already.

"What was that for?" Harry hissed at her when the press of students carried him past her. He should have kept his mouth shut, but he couldn't help it. The professor, who'd only been found out as a half-giant last year and hadn't experience the full barrage of wizarding prejudices until now, was nearly in tears. So were a few of the students who were shocked at Umbridge's blatant bigotry and cruelty.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rivers, I'm afraid I don't understand," she said in a voice of innocence.

"He's not a bad teacher, and he's not an idiot. I know I've only been getting lessons from him for less than a month, but even I can see that he knows this subject. I think you've got your knickers in a twist because he won't tell you, and therefore the Minister, where he was this summer. That's between him and his boss, so I suggest you take it up with the Headmaster. Don't punish him for doing his job, Madam Undersecretary."

Her face had been getting steadily more dark and foreboding as he went, and his plowing on through her expression of seething rage was not intelligent. But why? Why wasn't he allowed to say what he was thinking, why wasn't he allowed to speak the truth? It didn't make any sense to hold back something like this, not when it was so obvious to everyone around him. It didn't make sense to pretend you didn't see something, when you did. Why should he be afraid of her?

“Mr. Rivers, I would learn to control myself, if I were you,” Umbridge said. Her eyes were wide and her cheeks pink. She was keeping herself from violence of some kind, but only just. Her voice was still sweet and high as a little girl’s, as innocent as a dove, but her face spoke differently. “You may find yourself in more trouble than you expect. You may find that secrets are hard to keep when the entire school is talking about you and what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Harry’s anger fell away as cold fear crept into his belly.

“For the record, Mr. Rivers, giants do not mix well in civilised society, nor are they capable of holding down a job of such responsibility. I would be careful about who I give my loyalty to. I m only acting in the best interests of you and your friends, after all.”

Harry moved forward with the other students, fighting down a sick feeling. She had the ability, and maybe even the power, to bring this whole thing crumbling down around him. Professor John Rivers had declared himself to the whole Order on the side of Dumbledore, against Voldemort, but it was still only a select few who knew who Professor Rivers and his son truly were. That could change, and change quickly, if he made Umbridge too angry. He needed to learn better control of his feelings. He’d never had a problem with self-control, not until he came here. He didn’t know what it was about this place that made him lose that ability.

Of course, maybe he’d just never really had anything to lose control over, until now.

“I need to let you all know before we begin that we’ll have a visitor today,” Sirius said, before all the students had even made it to their seats.

There was a collective groan.

“I know, I don’t like it anymore than you do, but all the teachers have to do it. She already has it in for me, so please, I’m begging you, just keep your heads down today. I’ll be conducting class as normal, but as long as the Ministry holds the position that You-Know-Who has not

returned, I can't talk about arming you against him and his Death Eaters. We'll be fine, as long as everybody—"

The door swung open, and the squat little High Inquisitor stepped in. Her outfit today was a pink tweed suit with a grossly oversized pink satin lapel. There was a pin on said lapel of a kitten's head with a sparkly pink bow around its neck. Harry hadn't thought he had the capacity to be amused by Umbridge, but he found himself ducking his head to hide his grin. Kittens, forsooth.

"As long as everybody will take their seats quickly so we can get the lesson started on time," Sirius finished in a comfortable tone that made it seem as though Umbridge's entrance hadn't changed the subject at all.

She immediately been marking something on the dreadful clipboard she carried everywhere she went. (The clipboard had become so infamous that the students had begun fantasizing about stealing it from her, somehow. Well, the Weasley twins wanted to hex it, but there was Fred and George for you.)

"Demonstrates inability . . . to control the students," she muttered aloud.

Harry actually relaxed, a bit. She was taking the same tack she'd done with Professor Hagrid. Trying to fluster Sirius by deliberate misconstrual of evidence in order to get him to make real mistakes. Luckily, Sirius had been forewarned by her conduct in the Care of Magical Creatures class, and he was ready for her. He just smiled politely, albeit a bit painfully.

"Yes, sir," a few of Harry's roommates chorused as they sat.

"Yes, Professor," Hannah Abbot added, a look of respectful awe on her face for good measure. Harry felt a flash of admiration for her, and winked when she twisted to get her quill for taking notes out of her bag. But he quickly refocused. It would take all his strength today to keep his mouth shut, his pride and temper under control, and not jeopardise Sirius during this inspection.

“Let’s start out by discussing the reading last night—”

“Ahem,” Umbridge said in a tiny voice.

“Yes, Inquisitor?” Sirius asked, giving her a haughty look that Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever seen from his godfather before.

“I simply wanted to be sure you knew I was here for your inspection today—”

“Yes, ma’am, you did manage to get me a copy of your schedule. Twice. I thank you for your tireless efforts to keep me well-informed. Today, I assumed you would like me to carry on as normal rather than calling attention to your presence. I apologise for not acknowledging your gracious assistance in bettering my class.”

Harry had known Sirius could pull off such insincerities better than he did with Professor Snape. With Snape, he wasn’t even trying. But this . . . this was impressive acting. Umbridge actually looked mollified by that intense burst of sarcasm. But most of the class was gazing at him with awe and hero worship in their eyes. They’d seen his real attitude before she walked in.

“Very well, carry on, then,” Umbridge said. Her eyes hardened again. No amount of talk was going to forgive Sirius in her eyes, not knowing what she did about him. Harry could only hope that anything on her report would be so totally ridiculous that even Fudge would question it. Not much chance of that, though, was there?

“Now, then, last night’s reading. Did anyone have trouble?”

“Yes, sir,” one of the Hufflepuff students, Ernie, Harry thought his name was, said. “I didn’t understand the description of the appropriate dueling stance when there are duos facing off. I just couldn’t picture it.”

The rest of the class gave Ernie disgusted looks, and Sirius actually laughed aloud.

“Honestly, Mr. Macmillan, there’s a picture of it at the end of the chapter.”

“Oh,” he muttered.

“Takes . . . delight . . . in embarrassing . . . students. Shows no . . . understanding of . . . their limitations,” Umbridge murmured.

Sirius’ smile froze for a moment, but it returned with a vengeance. In spite of themselves, Parvati and Lavender sighed when faced with his handsome grin.

“Of course, I realise not all of you would have been able to translate a picture on a page into a real-life situation in your minds,” he said soothingly. “Why don’t we have a little demonstration to be sure? Evan, Mr. Longbottom, you both know how it works?”

Grudgingly, the two boys nodded.

“Shows preferential treatment toward his son,” Umbridge said softly, marking on her clipboard.

“Excellent. And Ms. Abbot, I will ask you to pair up with Mr. Macmillan.”

The four took their places at the front of the room, and Sirius directed Ernie into the proper position, while the other three managed to find it on their own.

“Does everyone see how it works?”

“Yes, Professor,” the affirmation went around the room.

“Very good, you may all take your seats. Were there any other questions on the reading?”

There were none.

“Then let’s move on, shall we? Who can tell me the most effective method to protect oneself from the Imperius curse? Miss Granger?”

Hermione had not raised her hand, but she answered correctly, and Harry gave her a smile of encouragement. The class moved forward without too many comments from the Inquisitor until Sirius brought Ron and Dean up to the front of the room to practice some spells on one another. Then Umbridge really got into it.

“Come on, Dean, act like you mean to cause harm!”

“Encourages students to be violent . . .”

“Ron, you’re too slow, there! Do you want to be hit with that curse?”

“Insults students who are reluctant to participate in life-threatening demonstrations . . .”

“Neither of you are approaching this from the proper angle. Keep in your mind that you might be doing this for real someday.”

“Frightens them with fantastical and improbable situations . . . shows a severe obsession with violent conflict . . .”

Sirius ignored her throughout the demonstration, but when the boy returned to their seats, he did not ask for another set of volunteers, as he normally did. He asked them to take out their textbooks and read from the next chapter they were going to cover until the end of class.

“Substitutes homework assignments for complete lesson plans,” Umbridge said, barely able to hide the triumph in her voice, made a final note on her clipboard, and strode up to the front of the room.

Harry glared at her as she walked in front of him, heading for Sirius. He hated her thick waist hidden by that awful pink jacket, hated her thick ankles wobbling above too-high pink heels, hated her thick mind that refused to accept what was in front of her eyes and interpreted everything through a lens of hatred and bigotry. He hated everything about her, and he’d like nothing better than to shoot the worst hexes he knew at her, despite his very strong feelings on attacking someone from behind.

But he didn't. He loved Sirius more than he loved anything, and so he didn't. He kept his head down, just like he'd promised to do.

"You will receive the results of the inspection by the end of the week, Professor Rivers," she was saying to Sirius pleasantly.

"I'll look forward to it," Sirius replied with that grin that crinkled around his eyes. He was hoping to stun her with charm, Harry thought. It wouldn't work. That woman was impervious to the good things in life. She was rotten all the way through.

She exited, and Sirius grinned at the class with a much more natural expression. It was a genuine look of relief.

"Thank you," he said. "Now that we've got rid of her, who wants to try this out next?"

Harry strode down the corridor after Defense Against the Dark Arts with fury boiling around him in a nearly tangible cloud. He still held the new textbook in his hands, and he had to fight with himself not to chuck it down the stairs and watch it bounce all the way to the entrance hall. This book . . . it was worse than useless, it was trash. That Umbridge woman was ruining everything!

"Evan! Hey, Evan!"

He stopped, and turned, and forced himself to calm down. It was Hermione calling to him. But not even she could make him smile today.

"Evan, I know you're upset, but it'll be all right . . ."

"All right," he repeated scathingly. "Have you seen this book?"

She looked down at the copy she carried in her own arms. "It's a little bit useless," she said half-heartedly. "I know you and your father are disappointed, but . . ."

"Disappointed?"

“No, hear me out, Evan,” she said, raising her eyes.

He was so astonished, and happy, with her minor outburst, that he did. She’d never spoken to him like that before. He wondered if he’d just seen what she was really like, underneath everything that had happened to her.

“You’re disappointed, but he’s still teaching. It’s an awful book, and the High Inquisitor is going to really restrict what he can do, but he’s still teaching. Look at what she’s done to Professor Trelawney. You know she’s been given the sack?”

Harry nodded. He saw tears standing in Hermione’s eyes, and that made the news worse than he’d thought it was before. “I didn’t even think you liked her.”

“I don’t, but she doesn’t deserve that kind of humiliation.” Hermione had reverted to her quiet, almost-whispering voice. “No one does. The only reason she’s not homeless and hungry is that the headmaster stepped in.”

“And found a centaur to replace her,” Harry said with a smile. “I heard. I’ll bet Umbridge just loved that.”

Hermione sighed, but it was shaky, like she was holding back from crying. “All I’m trying to say is that, she might think your father is too violent and want to restrict him, but she didn’t fire him. You have to be thankful for that.”

“What about the fact that she doesn’t want us armed to face our enemies?” Harry challenged. “If Dad’s not teaching us, who will?”

“You really believe that, Evan? That we have enemies out there who’d like to hurt us?”

Harry’s mind flashed back to that awful night in the graveyard. He remembered Barty Crouch coming for him with a knife. That burning look in his eyes. He shuddered.

“No,” he said slowly. Hermione looked relieved. “If you’re on the headmaster’s side, they don’t want to harm you. They want to kill you.”

Hermione’s arms tightened around her books. “Oh, Evan,” she said in dismay.

“I will be taking five points away from Gryffindor for the lies you are spreading among the students, Mr. Rivers,” said a voice behind him. Harry whirled around and saw Umbridge. His chest heaved with a deep breath, and he knew, knew, he couldn’t stop everything he was thinking from spilling out of his mouth this time. This book, this patronising book . . . it was all just because she couldn’t outright fire Sirius. It wasn’t part of the agreement.

But just before he spoke, a gentle hand touched his arm.

“Don’t, Evan,” Hermione pleaded, whispering. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “Don’t give her a reason.”

Harry took another breath. And another. And another. The constriction in his chest eased, and his tongue remained still. He was amazed. He hadn’t known he had it in him. But he couldn’t apologise, he couldn’t bring himself to do that. So he stayed completely silent, and waited for Umbridge’s smug face to pass out of sight.

“If she thinks she’s won,” Harry began through gritted teeth.

“Don’t get yourself thrown out,” Hermione said softly. “She hates you, Evan. I don’t know why, but she does. Maybe it’s your father, how he publicly supports the headmaster about You-Know-Who. But if you give her the opportunity, she’ll expel you. I know she will. Don’t let her do it, please.”

Harry swallowed something raw in his throat, something that had crept in at the sight of her sad, pleading face. “Why?” he said huskily. “Why not? I got along fine without this school before.”

A tear dropped from her eye and rolled down her cheek, creating a glimmering line.

“But we’re all so much better for having you here,” she whispered, and before he could speak, she’d ducked away down a side corridor, obviously looking to escape from him.

When Harry entered Snape’s dungeon classroom, he was thinking about nothing more than turning in an excellent performance. He hated to admit to himself that he wanted to impress the Potions professor, but he did. Snape was so brave, so dangerous, so brilliant . . . Harry had to come up with some way to make Snape see that he was not James Potter, and that the professor had no reason to dislike him. He wanted Snape’s good opinion, for whatever reason. He hated to admit it, but he had to. There was no other explanation for why he paid so much attention in a class that came like second nature to him.

So seeing Umbridge in the room hit him in the gut like a suckerpunch. He’d been hoping she’d inspected one of the other Potions classes already. He dropped into his seat, his lips compressed and his face nearly white. Draco stared at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s here,” he muttered as quietly as possible.

“So what? She’s been inspecting the whole castle for weeks, now.”

Harry said nothing, but he removed his Potions kit from his bag with unnecessary force. Draco just raised an eyebrow and kept silent. He did that so rarely, Harry had to wonder if it wasn’t Umbridge’s presence affecting him, as well.

Snape walked in, looking imperious as always, but there was an extra note of sourness to his face today. He looked at Umbridge with his empty black eyes and said in a completely toneless voice, “I see you’ve managed to find the classroom.”

Anger or annoyance did not really help dissipate her likeness to a toad, Harry found. She didn’t like being spoken to that way. Honestly,

hadn't she expected it from someone, after how much of it she'd been dishing out?

"It is not hidden, Professor Snape. As I'm sure you're aware, I am here to conduct your interview. Please proceed with the class, so I may observe it."

Snape looked icier and less human than Harry had ever seen him before. "As you wish," he muttered. He spun about, and waved his wand, so that instructions for the day's potion appeared on the board. "We discussed this particular elixir in detail last week, so you should be fully prepared to brew it. Everyone will take out their ingredients and tools and begin immediately. I expect no talking while you are working. I will make rounds of the room and observe your work. If you have any questions after the lecture last week, you may ask them when I observe your table."

This entire speech was purely for Umbridge's benefit, of course. Normally, once the instructions appeared, he had no further instructions and proceeded to walk around the room making nasty comments whenever a potion was less than perfect. Even Harry had been subject to a few. Snape had been holding back from any personal comments, so apparently he'd decided Harry was right about his hatred being too revealing.

They all worked in silence, as requested. Harry had worried that some of the Gryffindor students would act up and try to get Snape fired, but they seemed to be willing to take his side against her. Or maybe it was just that they'd take the devil they knew over the devil they didn't. Or hell, maybe they actually liked the guy and hid it so as not to embarrass him. Who knew? Point was, they all made the best showing possible for Umbridge.

But Umbridge was taking a different route than Harry had seen with Hagrid and Sirius. She followed Snape around the room, marking down everything he said to the students without saying a word to him. Then she started in on the questions.

"How long have you held this post?"

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“How do you feel about the headmaster?”

Snape fielded all of them with his usual icy disdain, but Harry could see the woman getting under his skin. Merlin, she could get to anybody if she could get to Snape. Harry was horrified to think of Snape snapping and insulting her bad enough to get himself fired. If he lost that connection to Dumbledore, what would Voldemort do to him?

“You have applied for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher several times, I am told. You have been unsuccessful?”

Snape gritted his teeth and prepared to reply. Someone snorted. It took Harry a moment to realise that it had been him. Several of the students were looking his way, and Umbridge’s expression was anticipatory.

“Yes, Mr. Rivers?”

“It’s a ridiculous line of questioning,” Harry said. “So what if he didn’t get that position? How does that have any effect whatsoever on his ability to teach Potions? It’s completely illogical to think that not being the best candidate to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts means he can’t teach this class. He’s a brilliant Potions master either way.”

They all stared at him in shock. All except Umbridge. She looked positively gleeful.

“Mr. Rivers, you are interfering with my interview and you are being disrespectful. Ten points from Gryffindor, and you may look forward to detention this evening.”

“Oh, goody,” Harry muttered.

“That will be a further five points from Gryffindor,” she sang out.

“Everyone get back to your work,” Snape added. But then his eyes fell on Harry again, and he appeared much more puzzled than angry.

"You will be in my office in half an hour," Professor McGonagall said to Harry, catching him as he stood up from the dinner table. They'd just been discussing their upcoming first Quidditch game, and Harry blinked in surprise, caught off guard.

He stepped away from the table, his voice low. "I thought my Occlumency lessons were on hold until Umbridge lightens up."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Rivers. You will be serving your detention with me this evening."

Harry couldn't help but smile. "With you? Not with the old toad?"

"I would keep my voice down and look less pleased if I were you, Mr. Rivers," McGonagall said sharply. "My office, half an hour." She hurried away.

"Brilliant," Harry said, and hurried up to the Tower to get as much studying done as possible before he had to appear in her office. It wasn't much. He was distracted by thoughts of Umbridge, the useless state of the curriculum after her inspections, and the rumour that Professor Hagrid might be going the way of Trelawney and getting the sack. When he showed up to serve his detention, he hadn't even finished his Herbology homework, much less picked up the detested new DADA textbook.

"I don't know how to thank you, Professor," he said as he took the seat she directed him into.

"Don't thank me just yet. You will be scrubbing down all the desks and blackboards. Without magic."

"Also without Umbridge," he said happily.

Professor McGonagall looked at him with her mouth pursed up with intense dissatisfaction. "You must learn caution, Mister . . . Mr. Potter. You need to keep a better hold on your temper."

“My temper?” Harry shot back. “I’ve been keeping hold on my temper, Professor, I think I’ve been keeping a great hold on it. I’ve sat there and watched her destroy everything and ruin Sirius’ class and I’ve sat there and listened to everyone saying she’s going to fire Professor Hagrid, and I haven’t said a word! I’ve been threatened and followed around and picked at, and I never answered back! Now I’m sorry, Professor, but I couldn’t just sit there and wait for Snape to lose it and get himself fired when he’d probably get killed by Voldemort for failing him! At least this way, I’m the one in trouble!”

He hadn’t known how loud his voice had been raised until he stopped for a moment and heard it ringing in the empty room. He winced, and forced himself to settle down.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said, much more quietly. “Maybe I ought to get a better hold on my temper.”

Professor McGonagall looked sad, for some reason. “No, I apologise, Mr. Potter. You are doing very well, under the circumstances. I confess, I am afraid for you. I know how hard it is, but you must remember what it is in the High Inquisitor’s power to do. We are all stretched to the breaking point, but keep in mind that we are in it together. It might be hard, but you must keep yourself under control and give her no cause to bring further grief to you. Do you understand?”

“I’m not stupid, Professor.”

“No, no you’re not,” she sighed, and for a moment, she looked old and tired. “It might be easier if you were.”

Chapter Eleven

Harry was getting faster.

He hadn't noticed it at first. It used to be that when he started his daily run, the sky was still gray and cold and the pink blush of morning would creep up on him as he ran, so that by the time he finished up with his martial arts exercises, the sun would be shooting directly into his eyes. But today, when he straightened up from his last series of sweeping kicks designed to knock an opponent's feet out from under them, he saw that the sun was still hiding under its shy pink glow.

Could be that the sun's coming up later, it's late autumn after all. But he knew that it wasn't just that. He'd managed to get himself in shape, somehow. Well, you know what that means, don't you? He was walking to cool down his muscles, trying not to freeze to death in the cold, misty air with nothing but jogging shorts and a light jacket for protection, but instead he drew his arms up closer to his sides and broke into a jog again. It meant he had time for another lap of the Quidditch pitch. Now that he'd mastered two, he had to start running three.

He could do something right, at least.

He was full of the cheerful sense of accomplishment and the general good will that suffused him after exercise, when he climbed back up to the dormitories for a shower. With a practiced flick of his hand, he made sure his aggravatingly long hair was safely covering his forehead and began thinking about what he had to do before the end of the week. Classes, of course, but his homework was caught up and he was actually understanding Ancient Runes now so he didn't need a dozen extra study sessions. Then he felt a thrill in his belly. Tomorrow night was their last team practice before the first game of the season. He was a little worried about Angelina, although the twins assured him that their last captain had been, if anything, more dedicated than she was. He hoped she didn't tear all of those lovely braids out in practice tomorrow.

When he got to the staircase that separated the boys' rooms from the girls' he heard footsteps and looked up. He felt a flash of déjà vu when he saw who was coming down and had to resist the urge to act like he had that first day—leaning against the wall, acting witty. She hated him now, and he didn't much like her, either. But by Merlin, she was a pretty girl. He hadn't known he had a thing for red hair, but his crush on her made it kind of obvious.

"Morning, Ginny," he said. He didn't like this whole "being uncomfortable just being around each other" thing, so he gave her a smile and tried to act casual.

"You're done with your run?" she asked, completely ignoring his greeting.

"Yeah, just finished."

"Good," she said, practically pressing herself up against the wall to avoid any accidental brushes against him as she went by.

He finally noticed what she was wearing—Muggle exercise clothes, like he was. "You're going for one?"

She turned around and gave him the evil eye. "Yes."

He didn't rise to the bait, letting her snappish demeanour play itself out. He just looked at her.

"I like it, okay? I want to do it, I was just waiting for you to finish so I could go down."

Harry felt guilty. He hadn't wanted it like this, hadn't wanted to start a fight where they couldn't even be on opposite ends of the same Quidditch pitch—oh. Maybe that was the problem. It was the pitch. The only really good place to exercise in the whole school was the place where she'd been humiliated by him. Oops.

"Ginny, look, I'm sorry, I didn't—"

“Save it, Rivers. Why don’t you just focus on your practice tonight and the game coming up. Wouldn’t want you to fail spectacularly and find yourself replaced.”

Ginny flounced out, leaving Harry on the stairs confused and upset. She didn’t have to take it this far. It wasn’t his fault she was the person she was, and it wasn’t his fault she’d asked him for his opinion on that person. If he was the better Quidditch player as well, then that was just life, wasn’t it? Obvious, she hadn’t taken the high road and seen getting moved to the reserves for what it was, preferring to think he was somehow out to get her. He was suddenly determined to play the best game of Quidditch anyone had ever seen, and show her that it was no mistake he’d been chosen. He deserved to be on this team.

Well. At least he deserved the chance to prove it.

Draco was amusing himself by hexing Harry’s personal belongings. He kept levitating Harry’s ink bottle a few inches off the desk, then releasing it so that drops of ink splattered into Harry’s face. Harry calmly used his own wand to clean the ink spots up, not resorting to using it in retaliation. Then he charmed Harry’s knife, which he’d just been about to pick up, to spin around too quickly to grab without cutting himself. He quietly broke the spell and picked up his knife. He wasn’t sure why Draco was acting like a spoiled eight-year-old, except that perhaps he was more spoiled eight-year-old than he was anything else. He wasn’t going to ask, either. He was just going to wait for him to get bored.

“Mr. Rivers, you will put your wand down and pay attention, or you will lose five points for your house,” Snape intoned, never even looking up from his disconcertingly close inspection of Neville’s work.

Harry huffed in annoyance, but only said, “Yes, sir.”

See there? He was getting better about holding his tongue and not letting his temper get the better of him. Despite how difficult everyone around him was making it.

Draco began directing small parchment pellets behind them so he could bounce them off the back of Harry’s head. It almost caused

Harry to make a mistake on his potion, and he was really not willing to give Snape any opportunity to claim he wasn't working to OWL standard and drop him back a year.

"What is your problem?" he growled.

Draco's eyes were wide and innocent. "What problem?"

Harry levitated several of the pellets off the floor and directed them into the center of Draco's forehead.

"Ow!" he hissed, shooting Harry an iron gray gaze.

"Well?"

"Nothing, I'm just bored."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So what? Do your work anyway."

"It's putting me to sleep."

"Not everything in the world is designed to make your life more interesting, and that includes me. So leave me alone, I'm trying to work."

"Mr. Rivers, I have already given you ample warning. Five points from Gryffindor."

Stop playing favourites with your house, Harry thought viciously. Who are you helping by encouraging him?

Snape straightened up from the desk that Goyle and Crabbe were sharing, and the amused expression he was wearing was wiped right off and replaced with mild astonishment. He stared at Harry.

Oh, no way he heard me. Whoops.

Snape didn't say another word to Harry for the rest of the class period, but thankfully neither did Draco. But when Harry approached Snape's desk with a small sample phial of his potion, Snape silently slid a

scrap of parchment across the desk. Harry palmed it while he handed the phial over and read it on his way out the door.

We will resume your lessons tonight.

Harry turned back in the doorway, nodded stiffly, and hurried out, determined to escape from Draco before the boy could do anything else ridiculously childish.

Harry caught Neville's eyes and saw open hostility. It surprised him. They were uncomfortable right now, sure, but he didn't know what would cause Neville to be so upset. He knew Neville would never just come to him and tell him, so he was going to have to go to Neville. Well, no time like the present. He'd just nab him as they left the classroom.

Of course, maybe Neville was just blaming Harry for the absolute mockery of a class they'd just sat through. The students could all see Professor Rivers chafing under the restrictions Umbridge had imposed, but he'd been a model of reform, giving them the most boring lessons in the world. One never knew when the High Inquisitor would pop back in to check up on him. And while Umbridge couldn't really fire Sirius, she could make his life living hell.

The Ministry has really got to accept that Voldemort's back, Harry thought with despair. This outright war with me just for saying he is has got to stop.

Still, first things first. He had to know what he'd done to upset Neville. But on his way out, he felt a presence very close behind him and whirled around, ready to defend.

"We need to talk," Sirius murmured to Harry, pretending he was just hugging him. The class's lack of suspicion as they filed out of the room was helped by the fact that the professor and his son had never displayed any discomfort with physical affection between one another. Sirius had hugged him for one reason or another when he was leaving class many times.

“About what?” he said, stepping back a little and disguising their conversation with a playful jab into Sirius’ side.

“Arthur Weasley keeps giving me these looks during meetings. Apparently I should have done something to stop you hurting his daughter’s feelings.”

Harry continued the act, still smiling and acting like they were talking about nothing important, but his jaw clenched around the smile. “She went crying to her parents because I’m a better Quidditch player?”

“She’s been acting distant enough that her parents asked her brother, the one in your year, what was wrong. He said you two had been in a fight.”

“We did fight,” Harry said, and shrugged. “So?”

“I don’t want anybody in the Order having reason not to trust one another, okay? From now on, leave the girl alone.”

Harry sighed. He and Sirius hadn’t had much time to talk lately, and this just made it obvious. “No problem,” he muttered. For the benefit of anyone still watching as they shuffled out of the classroom, he gave Sirius one last joking punch to the ribs, and gathered his things up quickly, anxious to resume his mission.

“Neville. Hey, Neville!” Harry called, jogging to catch up with him.

“Leave me alone, Evan.”

Harry caught up, and slowed down. He was gratified that he wasn’t even breathing hard, but that wasn’t really his main concern right now.

“No,” he said, his voice quiet. “Tell me what I’ve done this time.”

Neville cocked his head, and his expression faded into something resembling amusement. “This time?” He shook his head. “You’re getting into that much trouble?”

Harry thought over his problems with Umbridge, with Ginny, Draco, and Snape; the fact that even though the entire Order had been informed by Dumbledore of what Harry's role was in the coming conflict with Voldemort, he still trusted only half of them with the truth of Harry's identity. Then there was, of course, Voldemort himself. He had to know who Harry was and where he was, but so far, Dumbledore's theory that he wouldn't escalate things without understanding their motives was holding. But "not escalating" did not mean "not taking action" and Harry knew Voldemort was gathering followers and eliminating threats while Harry was busy studying for school exams.

"You have no idea," he said with a heavy sigh. All in all, it was kind of a relief to have somebody around who knew the truth, even if Neville hated him for it. Because there was something like sympathy on Neville's face. That was only natural, considering that Neville had been the one expected to face all this not so long ago.

But Neville looked away again and kept walking.

"Hold on," Harry said, following him again. "I wanted to talk you. What's going on?"

"Umbridge," Neville said darkly, as though that one word was enough of an explanation. It almost was, but Harry had the feeling there was more to it than the dislike the rest of the school harboured toward her.

"What has she done?"

"She gave me a detention last night for mouthing off to her."

"You did?" Harry asked.

Neville almost smiled. "It just sort of slipped out." He became very serious again. "She kept asking me about you. Not at first. She started out just giving me the same old shit that I've been getting for months, about how disappointed I must be not to be the right one, how awful I must feel about the lies, whether I knew all along that Harry Potter and Sirius Black were alive somewhere . . . but then she started probing me about Evan Rivers. Trying to get me to slip up and

admit that there's some kind of conspiracy going on between us. She's an idiot. She thinks there's some kind of huge plan between you and I and Dumbledore to sucker the world. It couldn't just be that You-Know-Who is really a threat, oh, no."

"What did you say to her about it?"

"Not much of anything. But I'm not looking forward to another interrogation, and we both know there will be one. She doesn't give up."

"No, she doesn't," Harry admitted.

"She's only here because of you to begin with," Neville said, the hostility rising to the surface again. "You brought her."

Harry felt himself go pale. He knew he looked pathetic and helpless, but having that truth spoken by someone other than him hurt too much. "I know," he muttered. "If Dumbledore had told me what he'd had to do, I would have . . . I wouldn't have done it like this."

That didn't seem to make Neville feel any better. "Look, I don't want her to see me talking to her, okay?" he said, picking up his pace to move ahead of Harry.

"But Neville . . ." Harry picked up his own pace to match. "She can't hurt you. There is no conspiracy."

"Just leave me alone."

"We shouldn't let her—"

"Back off, Evan!"

"Fine."

"Mr. Rivers, I will not tolerate you harassing the other students," said a prim voice, and Harry turned around with a feeling of sick dread. Oh, god, how did she always manage to be right there at the worst moments. "You will be serving a detention, tonight."

"With whom?" he ground out, hoping she'd say McGonagall. Professor McGonagall was one of the few people he could explain this latest infraction to.

"With me, Mr. Rivers," she said, giving him a simpering smile.

Harry twitched. "You're not a teacher."

"No, but I am a figure of authority in this school, and I have every right to oversee a detention that I assigned. I have an office on the corridor below the headmaster's office. You will report there at six-thirty tonight."

"I have a meeting with Professor McGonagall at seven," he said, hoping that Snape's Occlumency lesson would take precedent.

"It will be rescheduled," she said. Ah, well. He shouldn't have bothered with hope.

All things considered, Harry was not in the best of moods when he entered the Inquisitor's office at six-thirty that evening. Snape was not pleased by the rescheduling of the lesson, and McGonagall, who'd had to be informed since it was her office they were using, had tried to give Harry another lecture about his temper. He'd told her that wasn't what happened, and he'd told Professor Snape that he hadn't been trying to get out of the lesson, but he didn't think either of them believed him, entirely. That just made him mad. Why should anybody think he was lying? If he'd been trying to get out of the lesson, he'd have come up with a much more enjoyable alternative than a detention, and he'd have just told Snape so to begin with. He wasn't a liar.

"You have managed to be on time, I see," Umbridge said, smiling pleasantly. Harry wasn't fooled by the smile, nor by the supposedly harmless image projected by her office. It was bloody awful, it was. Pink everywhere. Pink pillows on pink armchairs, and ludicrous doilies on everything. Not to mention the kittens. Colourful, gamboling kittens on decorative plates. What an eyesore.

He sat down. "What am I to do?"

"First, let's have a cup of tea. There is no reason not to be pleasant, now, is there?" she asked, picking up a teapot in a ruffled pink tea skirt.

"No, thank you," Harry said, projecting the same calming tone into his voice. "I don't drink caffeine at night."

"Nonsense, Mr. Rivers, it will not harm you."

If Harry had been suspicious before, this was like blaring the alarm and flashing the red lights. Whatever else happened, he wasn't drinking that tea.

"My father won't allow it, I'm afraid. I don't want to disobey him." He gave her the same wide-eyed, innocent look she always used, knowing he had her trapped. If she suggested he disobey his father, he could immediately go straight to the headmaster. She'd find some way to explain that he'd misconstrued her meaning, but it would certainly interrupt her planned detention.

"Well, then, Mr. Rivers, why don't we talk while I enjoy a cup?"

Harry was done playing her game, and he'd only been in here for three minutes. "Inquisitor, I'm not stupid. You can make me serve a detention with you, you can set me any number of punishments, but you can't make me drink your tea, and you can't make me talk to you. So get on with whatever last resort punishment you had in mind, because I'm not talking."

"Very well," she said, and the happiness she projected as she stood up was entirely too convincing. Harry felt a chill go down his spine. She shouldn't be happy over losing the first battle. She picked up a quill and a piece of parchment from her desk. "You will be doing lines."

"Lines?" Harry asked in confusion.

“Yes, Mr. Rivers. You will use this quill and write lines until I am satisfied.”

“What am I to write?” he asked, taking the items as she set them in front of him.

“Perhaps, ‘I must respect authority,’” she said, as though it were a suggestion.

Harry turned the quill over in his hands. “Do I get any ink?”

“No, you will not need it. You may begin, Mr. Rivers.”

Was it just stubbornness on her part that she kept calling him that? Or did she think it would bother him? Well, it was starting to bother him. He set the quill down on the parchment, getting a bad feeling about this. He started writing, and his hand sent a signal of sharp pain down his arm. Harry jumped. He stared at his hand. He stared up at her, his eyes widening despite his determination to show no weakness. What was happening?

He set the quill to the paper again, and began writing. The pain in his hand only got sharper, and finally the words cut through the surface of his hand so that it bled on the desk. But he kept writing. He showed no pain, and didn’t even look up. He wrote carefully, making sure his handwriting was at its best. Spitefully, he began adding embellishments. A curlicue here, a flourish on the tail there. It made the stinging pain even worse, and he was glad. If she thought this was intimidating, she’d better think again.

Harry knocked on the door of Professor Snape’s office, hoping he was in there. He had his hand wrapped in a fold of his school robes, but he needed to give it some proper treatment. All those embellishments to his handwriting had made a great, raw mess of the back of his hand. He didn’t want to go to the hospital wing. He wanted to have it fixed before anyone else could see it. He wouldn’t give Umbridge the satisfaction of telling anyone else what had happened in her office. He wouldn’t give her any tools to create more fear among the students. Besides, maybe that was a special punishment

she'd been reserving for him and it wasn't anything for anyone else to worry about. Sadistic bitch.

"Yes, what is it?" Snape's voice was harsh.

"It's Evan, sir. May I come in?"

There was a long pause, as though he was considering, then footsteps to the door. Snape opened it and tried to fill up the doorway with his body. That he was trying only made Harry more interested to see what he was hiding in the room. He turned his head and saw Draco, his face petulant as he dusted a shelf full of glass bottles. With his own two hands. Harry didn't laugh. He didn't even snicker. But he did duck his head to hide his smile. Detention was a catching disease, these days.

"Yes?"

Harry didn't want Draco to know about this. Dammit. He wouldn't have even come to Snape if he weren't the most likely person in the school to know what to do about his injury. He looked at Draco, and bit his lip. He didn't know how to get the other boy out of the room without tipping him off that secrets were being kept from him. And Snape was being supremely unhelpful, just looking at him with his eyebrows raised in question even though he knew perfectly well what Harry's problem was and could have solved it as simply as sending Draco to clean the classroom shelves instead.

"Oh, screw it anyway," he muttered. "Never mind, sir, I can see you're busy. Sorry to have disturbed you."

He headed up to Gryffindor Tower thinking he might be able to put something together out of his own potions ingredients. He knew some mild pain relievers and skin mending treatments, he just hadn't wanted to sit down and brew them up in the middle of his bedroom. Fine. This was all just the best night of his life anyway, might as well have Ron, Dean, and Seamus asking him what happened to his hand. Not that they'd actually care, they'd just look horrified and suggest he interrupt the busy schedule of the headmaster to point out to him that Umbridge was rotten when he already knew that. He wasn't

expecting sympathy (hell, he'd gone to Professor Snape, but he wasn't all that chuffed about getting stared at, either.

But when he got up there and stormed through the common room, somebody noticed. Somebody who might actually care somewhat. Hermione met him by the stairs, taking him by surprise. Her forehead was wrinkled with worry.

"Evan?"

"Ah, Miss Hermione!" He drew his hand further into his sleeve and kept his arm down at his side. "I, uh, I'm just going up to my room. How are you?"

"Me? I'm fine. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

She didn't have to say anything. She just looked at him.

"I just got done serving a detention with Umbridge. I guess I'm just a little upset. I'm sorry."

"What's wrong with your arm?"

"What do you mean?" he said. He wasn't dumb enough to think she meant the one he was using to hold the banister of the stairs. He held out his other arm, with the robes carefully draped over the hand. "It's fine."

She frowned, but said nothing. Then the blood that had soaked into his sleeve began to plop in slow droplets onto the first step of the staircase.

She hissed. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he murmured.

"You aren't going to the hospital wing?"

Harry shook his head. "It's no big deal."

"You're bleeding on the floor," she whispered, looking down at the small spatter beneath his outstretched arm. Her face was pale. When she looked up, she looked more determined than Harry had ever seen her before. "Come on, let's go up to your room."

"My room?" he repeated. This was most definitely not what he'd expected from her.

"Obviously you have your reasons for trying to keep this a secret, but you have to take care of this. Let me help."

Harry shrugged. "I can handle it."

"You're going to brew a healing potion with one hand?"

He had no response but to shrug again. He was lost in amazement at the take-charge attitude she was displaying. It wasn't something he'd ever seen from her before, but he liked it. It suited her better than timidity.

"Come on, then," she said, and led the way up the stairs on the boys' side. "Just so you know," she said casually, "if you try to get into the girls' rooms, the stairs turn into a slide and it sets off an alarm."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he vowed grandly, his good hand pressed over his heart, making her giggle. He didn't think anyone was watching them, but he still turned to make sure nobody was paying attention to the fact that Hermione Granger was going into his room.

He shouldn't have worried. With a few simple directions from Harry and his notes from Sascha, Hermione whipped up a poultice for his hand in minutes. While she worked, she drew the truth out of him. The truth was simple enough, really, but when Hermione tried to press him to talk to somebody about it, he drew back. She didn't really get it. The headmaster, the teachers who were loyal to him . . . they didn't have the power, right now. Telling them about this would only make them feel more helpless. Not that he was looking for a lot

of sympathy from them, either. But if word got back to Sirius, Sirius would do something very rash. Harry didn't want that to happen.

It was less than ten minutes before Hermione slipped back downstairs with Harry's thanks and no suspicion raised among their housemates. Harry was restless, but he had his hand wrapped up in a poultice full of essence of murtlap, so he just stayed in his room and thought about all the things Sirius could be teaching them if he was allowed. He wished he had the freedom to like Hogwarts. It wouldn't be hard to love this school, if it weren't for all this being-Harry-Potter stuff.

Was it stupid, to wish he was really Evan Rivers? It probably was. But it didn't make him stop wishing it.

Chapter Twelve

“Ready for the game, Rivers?” Draco taunted, plopping himself down at the Gryffindor table as though it didn’t bother him one bit. It did, of course, bother him, and more than a bit, but it was the best opportunity he was going to have to give Harry grief before the Quidditch game.

Harry supposed he could have said any number of very stupid things. I was born ready, or ready to kick your arse, or something. Instead, he tried for a little honesty.

“I’d feel a lot better if the first real Quidditch game I’ve ever played wasn’t going to be against you,” he admitted. Didn’t stop him from eating breakfast, anyway, even if it was just cornflakes. It wouldn’t do to feel too heavy before the match, but he wasn’t about to go without, either, no matter the state of his nerves. He saw Draco had a similar idea, as he was holding a piece of buttered toast in one hand and cup of tea in the other.

Draco looked surprised by that, and he didn’t know what to say, so he took a bite of his toast. Harry smiled a little as he did the same with his own breakfast. He liked catching Draco off-guard like that. It was only too easy, really—an honest word, a confession of some weakness, expressing faith that he could do something good—and Draco was lost. He understood the complexities of deceitful plots and selfishness, but nothing so simple as saying what you meant.

Harry looked over at those Slytherins who had decided to wake up early enough for breakfast on a Saturday. “Your housemates are staring at you,” he pointed out.

Draco shrugged, sipping his tea with an attitude approaching regal. He glanced along the sparsely populated Gryffindor table. “Yours aren’t.”

Harry shrugged. “Mine have accepted the fact that we’re friends and moved on.”

"Mine still think I'm spying on you lot for some reason, which is of course what I'll tell my father when he finds out about me sitting here." Draco scoffed. "As if you'd ever be clever enough to disguise anything I couldn't see from a distance."

"Oh, I know better than to think you've dissuaded them from that idea," Harry drawled, and polished off his cornflakes with one last large bite.

Draco shuddered fastidiously as he watched Harry try to chew, but there was an expression of sheer frustration on his face. "I don't have any other explanation for it."

Harry found that sad, not frustrating, and he probably shouldn't have asked the question, but he did. "Don't any of you have friends just for the sake of friendship?"

Draco looked positively stunned by the question. "Of course we do, we . . . I mean, in our own house, we . . ." He stood up. "I don't have time for this. I have to prepare to wipe the field with you."

Harry grabbed his coffee cup and followed Draco as he stalked out of the Great Hall. It rankled him to have things end on bad notes. He never liked to leave things unresolved, for however short a period of time. He was too used to abruptly leaving and never coming back to allow misunderstandings to linger.

"Hey, come on, don't get all shirty just because I can't keep my mouth shut," Harry complained. "You already know I can't."

Draco stopped, his posture stiff. "So I'm sure you'll understand if I find your lack of decorum unforgiveable."

"Oh, please," Harry snorted. "You're just upset that I pointed out your house's shortcomings. You've pointed out mine enough, it's your turn. Besides, you don't really have to worry about the fact that Slytherin's a bunch of self-serving bastards. You happen to have a friend in the stupid house that values friendship."

Draco turned away again, and Harry took a step after him, then he paused.

“You actually like this, don’t you?” he called out, staying where he was. “You like watching me follow you, trying to keep you around. Because you’re so much better than me, and I ought to work for it. Right?” He couldn’t keep the anger out of his voice. He’d actually thought he was being offensive for a minute, but that wasn’t why Draco kept walking away. He didn’t like the discovery. In fact, the anger that was always simmering just under the surface these days was only too easy to let go of, and it was only through real effort that he kept it down to such a low level now.

Draco looked even more stiff and uncomfortable, if that were possible. “Don’t be ridiculous, Evan.” But it was obvious that the words had done something. He was thinking about it.

“Well, what is it, then?”

“As I told you, I have to get ready for the game. You do know I’m going to slaughter you, right?”

Harry scoffed, deciding the only thing to do at this point was to make light of it. “You wish, Draco. I hope it won’t be too embarrassing that I’m catching the Snitch while you’re still trying to get off the ground.”

Draco seemed relieved, and walked away with a more natural smile on his face. Harry turned around, and found Ginny Weasley right there. “Oh! Hi!”

“Morning, Rivers,” she said. Her voice was low and thoughtful, and she was staring at Draco’s retreating figure as though she’d like to hex him. “You know, I was sort of hoping that you’d fail and I’d get my place on the team back, but . . .” She shook her head, and looked at the ground. “I’m not as good a Seeker as he is. I hope you destroy him out there.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “It’s not, ‘all is forgiven, we can be friends,’ but I’ll take what I can get. Thanks, Ginny.”

His method with Ginny lately, just to survive living in the same House, was to speak only when necessary and beat a hasty retreat as soon as possible afterwards. It was exactly what he didn't like to do, but he knew she wasn't ready for another long chat, either. Still, as he left her this time, his heart felt much lighter than it had before. Maybe the feud wouldn't last forever.

Contrary to Harry's flippant remark, he did not catch the Snitch before Draco had mounted his broom. He did, however, narrowly avoid a Bludger that was whalloped by one of the Slytherin Beaters directly toward his face. Having to roll in the air before he'd even got fully settled did not put him in a good mood about the rest of the match. Maybe the thing to do would be to catch the Snitch as soon as possible before anyone could come to bodily harm.

But, no, he couldn't do that. Angelina had seen during practices that her new teammate had extraordinary skill, and so she'd thought it was necessary to ask him not to catch the Snitch until Gryffindor had a tidy score already. She wanted to start out the season with a healthy lead.

Not that it mattered, Harry thought sourly, scanning the air and seeing nothing. The Snitch was nowhere in sight, so the decision was made for him.

"Rivers! What is this?"

He looked up above him to see Draco scowling down.

"What's what?"

"You have the Firebolt Mark Two, Rivers."

"Ah . . . yes, I do. Dad got it for me to say congratulations on making the team."

Draco, and the rest of his team, were riding the original Firebolt, which had come out only two years ago and was generally considered the best broom in the business. Harry would have been happy enough with a Nimbus 2001, but when Sirius had found out

that Lucius Malfoy had supplied the entire Slytherin team with the Firebolt, he'd decided that Harry was to have the Mark Two, which had not proven itself yet as the original model. Harry thought Sirius might be taking the Quidditch season a little too seriously.

"I didn't know you had that kind of money," Draco tossed out. Leave it to him to come up with something insulting instead of just admiring the broom.

"We don't, really, but my Dad thought I ought to have the best." Harry shrugged. "If you don't mind, I'll just get back to the game."

Draco flushed with annoyance at the remark, put out just as much by the implication that he had something second-best as that Harry had called his own commitment to the game into question. He immediately darted away toward the other end of the pitch. Harry squinted, but decided that Draco was just putting some distance between them, not chasing the Snitch.

The game was going brilliantly. Angelina and Alicia, seemingly spurred on by the knowledge of their limited time left on the team, were performing like professionals, and pushing Katie to go above and beyond as well. The Slytherin Keeper was hard-pressed to keep up with the three of them, since Fred and George were doing such a lovely job of occupying the Slytherin Beaters with dirty tricks and the Slytherin Chasers just weren't as good as the Gryffindor girls. Harry was proud to be on the team. He'd seen them in practice and known they were good, but this was the first time he'd seen them in competition, and they seemed to thrive on it.

He'd better be doing his part for the team, he thought guiltily when he saw that the score now stood 80 to 20 and he'd been doing nothing but watching the game for several minutes. Draco was still at the other end of the pitch, hovering, but not doing much. Harry thought he was watching the game, too, then realised Draco was watching him. He'd decided to take the easy way out and wait for Harry to spot the Snitch, then beat him to it. Well, he can try.

“Wake up, would you, Evan?” bellowed Angelina as she soared beneath him, the Quaffle tucked under her arm. “I know I said let us get ahead, but you could at least be keeping an eye out!”

Harry began a slow circle. As he got closer to Draco, the other boy dropped lower; he seemed to be pretending he was actually looking. Then Harry’s heart skipped a beat. Draco was dropping faster. He wasn’t pretending—he’d seen it! Harry threw himself into a steep dive, ready for an out-and-out race for the ball. But Draco was slacking off, coming out of his decline, with a smug look.

“Should have seen your face, Evan,” he chuckled.

Harry pulled out of his dive and made a disgusted face. “Nice.” He turned to scan the air again, feeling annoyed with himself. He should know better than to fall for that kind of juvenile trick. He was better than this! And then . . .

“Gotcha,” he breathed, too softly for Draco to hear.

“You know, maybe if you were looking for the ball instead of just waiting for me to find it,” Draco chuckled.

“You’re right, Draco,” Harry said in a bright, unconcerned voice. “I’ll just leave you to it and go look over there, shall I?”

He shot away, leaving Draco looking befuddled.

“Hah! You think I’m going to fall for it right after I did it to you?” he shouted after Harry.

It wasn’t until Harry didn’t respond, because he was too busy zooming to the other end of the field, that Draco realised this was probably not a feint. He cursed loudly and pushed himself hard, but he knew it was basically useless. Even had he been riding the better broom, he couldn’t catch up at this point.

But the Snitch had abruptly reversed course, and was moving back in his direction. “Yes!” he shouted triumphantly, not even noticing (despite the fact that the announcer was shouting about it) that

Harry's reflexes had him turned around and back on the trail in the blink of an eye. Both Seekers zoomed toward each other, their eyes only for the tiny golden ball between them. It made a sharp upward movement, Draco followed, Harry followed, and then—

THUD!

The boys collided, and began to plummet. Draco maintained just enough presence of mind to right himself on his broom and level off before he hit the ground. Harry continued to spiral down, and the whole crowd was screaming at him to come to his senses, but Harry had other things on his mind. He'd had his eye on the ball the entire team, and he had known it was squashed between them when he and Draco had collided. It had fallen, and Harry was following it. He was loose on his broom and nearly out of control, but his fingers had closed around the Snitch, he'd caught it, he'd won the game, and Merlin the ground was right there, pull up Harry, pull up now . . .

He yanked his broom up sharply, but it was a fraction of a second too late to avoid any harm. The tail smacked the ground and Harry pitched off the back. With one hand on the Snitch, he used only the free one to try to catch himself, and he felt the bone in his wrist snap as he hit. For a moment, there was only a sick feeling, of knowing that it had happened. Then the pain rushed in.

He held up his closed fist, triumphantly closed over the Snitch, then he groaned and let himself go limp.

"Ow."

Harry strolled out of the hospital wing, flexing his mended wrist to be sure there was no pain. As he rounded the corner, he nearly ran into someone, and grabbed hold of her shoulders to keep himself from his second painful collision.

"Oh, hello Miss Hermione," he said when he realised who it was. He eased his hands off her shoulders. "Sorry about that."

"No, it was my fault," she said. "I was just coming to see how you were, actually."

He held out his arm. "Good as new."

"Didn't let her get a look at your other hand, though, did you?" she muttered.

Harry gave her a quelling look. This would not be the first time she tried to ask him what had happened to his hand and tried to make him get some professional attention. It was impossible to explain to her his silence without also explaining what Dolores Umbridge could do to him if he spoke out against her. It wasn't that he liked pain, it was just that he liked not destroying the Order's current plans or his own debatable privacy. Besides, he'd managed to avoid any more detentions with her.

"Well, come on, then," she said with a little smile. "I'm sure the whole House is waiting in the common room to celebrate."

"I'll be along in a minute, I just wanted to try to find out if Draco was okay first."

"What about me?" a familiar voice drawled.

"Speak of the devil," Harry said brightly, seeing Draco coming toward them.

"What?"

"Nothing, Muggle expression. Wow, are you okay?"

Draco managed to convey his mood with his facial expression, despite the fact that half of it was hidden by the hand he was using to pinch a handkerchief over his nose. The handkerchief had an unmistakeable red stain.

"Other than the fact that my nose won't stop bleeding, I'm just dandy."

"Sorry."

"You ought to be. Watch yourself, Miss High-and-Mighty, or he might send you to the infirmary next."

Draco sauntered past them. Harry gave himself the luxury of a brief moment to wonder how he managed to saunter with a bloody rag clapped to his face, but it must be all that rich pure-blood upbringing of his. Then he turned to Hermione. She was looking at the ground, visibly shaken.

"Hey, what's wrong? It's only Draco, he's always like that."

"You don't know, Evan," Hermione said in a vicious whisper. "You don't know what he's like when you're not around."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." She flushed red. "Never mind."

"Hermione, what has he said to you?"

"It's nothing, it's just him, like you said."

"Hermione . . ."

She stopped, and looked at him with tears in her eyes. "He's always going on about . . . about Viktor. About what happened. About how it was my fault, and I deserved it."

Harry sucked in a shocked breath. "That is the most ludicrous thing I've ever—"

"No, he's right," she muttered. "It was my fault."

"You know that's not true," he said softly, trying to put his hand on her shoulder. She drew away. "Hermione, he's being cruel when he says that. No one believes that at all."

"No one knows anything. Were you there? Professor Snape doesn't even know everything. How would you know what to believe?"

Helpless, he just held out his hands as though to show her he was holding no weapons. "You could tell me. If you wanted to. You don't have to keep it a secret, make it a burden like that. You can trust me."

Hermione let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, sure, Evan. I will if you will."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have your secrets, and I have mine. You tell me when you feel like sharing."

"Me? Secrets?"

"Don't act so innocent, Evan. You've got most people fooled into thinking you're a paragon of Gryffindor forthrightness, but you've spent enough time around me that I can see how much of yourself you keep hidden away. Like I said, I'll talk whenever you decide you will. Maybe then I'll actually trust you."

Hermione walked away. And Harry let her.

There was nothing he could say in his own defense, not really. She was right. He'd made a mistake by thinking he could have friends like her, thinking that he could be close to anyone. He shouldn't have allowed himself to like her so much, or anyone else for that matter. It was just going to be collateral damage when Voldemort came after him. The best thing for him to do now would be to let her walk away.

A strange sensation swooped through his belly. He gasped, putting his hands over his stomach. What on earth? Was he feeling . . . happy? This felt very much like joy, and there was nothing joyful about this situation. What was going on? Was he going crazy? He couldn't possibly be happy about this! He scratched his forehead, then snatched his hand away, afraid of scratching off some of the makeup over the scar. His scar was sort of burning.

"Voldemort," he murmured out loud. "It's Voldemort."

It hit him then. All of these bursts of anger and impatience, that had been going on for months, making him feel like he was becoming a different person—it wasn't him. It wasn't even his feelings. They were

Voldemort's feelings, coming through him via that connection centred in his forehead. He wasn't becoming some unpredictable emotional wreck after all! This stupid feeling of happiness that had come over him in the wake of Hermione's bitter words—that wasn't him, either. Now that he knew that, it was easy to sort out his own feelings of depression and hurt that lay underneath. He knew he would be able to sort of his personal feelings from the influences of Voldemort, now that he knew they had filtered into his waking hours. The knowledge was incredibly relieving, almost liberating.

Harry laughed.

"Good evening, Professor. Professor McGonagall," Harry added, seeing her rising from her desk.

"Well, then, I'll leave you to it," she said briskly.

"Thanks," he said, feeling bad about this already. Snape was looking at him like he was a juicy steak or something. "Are you ready for me, Professor?"

"I am, Potter."

Harry glanced at the closed door.

"I have cast several charms to keep anyone from overhearing, Potter, I am not completely incompetent."

Harry wanted to say something back, but he bit his tongue. "Yes, sir," he muttered.

"Now, these lessons have been put on hold for far too long already, so we have a lot of catching up to do. I assume you have been doing as I have asked and practicing by emptying your mind at night?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, mostly honestly. He hadn't practiced that often, but he had done it enough to remember everything that the priest in Kyoto had taught him. He was no master, but he was fairly adept at letting go of all thought and drifting into the white noise in his

head where meditation led him. It was usually something of a relief, to give his mind a break from all the things that worried it.

“Very well, then. Show me.”

Harry wasn’t used to doing it on command. He sat down at one of the desks, preparing himself.

“Well, Potter? We don’t have all night.”

“I’m just . . .”

“These lessons are to offer you some protection from the Dark Lord. Do not think that he has my patience.”

And you’re the soul of patience, are you? But Harry relaxed, and let his mind go as quickly as he’d ever managed it. He wasn’t sure how long he floated there, but it couldn’t have been more than a few moments before Snape was calling to him.

“Enough! Look at me, Potter!”

Harry came back to himself hazily, not prepared to snap out of it like that.

“I can see that you consider this a peaceful activity.” Snape sneered at him. “I assure you that it is not. Occlumency shields you against invasion. It is not some technique meant to soothe you, it is meant to discipline you! Listen to me. I am going to be attacking your mind, and that gentle little absence of thought is no protection at all. You have to raise shields, Potter. You have to be able to throw me back, do you understand?”

“Sort of,” Harry said. “But I’ll need you to show me how to do that.”

His lip curled. “That is why we are here, after all. Very well. Let’s begin. Legilimens!”

Harry was unprepared. Snape rushed right in, and picked out his most recent memory—eating dinner in the Great Hall with Ron and Dean and Seamus—and then rushed right back out.

“Do you see how easy that was? You have no defenses whatsoever.”

“I wasn’t ready—”

“Nor will you be should the Dark Lord discover the connection you share and seek to use it! You must be ready to counterattack without any warning! Your mind is pathetically open!”

“Then show me how to close it,” Harry said. “I’ve no idea how.”

“With discipline, Potter. Let’s try this again, shall we? Legilimens!”

Harry was ready, this time. He knew he didn’t have a prayer of keeping Snape out, not this time, so he instead picked the most random, innocent memory he had, and remembered it with all his might. Dudley, his pet monkey, scampering across his shoulders, chattering incessantly while Harry fed him fruit. He could feel Snape trying to get past that memory, to see other things, but Harry kept remembering the monkey. It was like standing on the inside of a door when someone was trying to push their way in. Dudley the monkey was that door, and Harry dug in his heels and shoved at it, keeping it in Snape’s way. Once again, he lost track of time. When Snape finally broke through, and saw the room where that memory had taken place, with Sirius and Harry’s tutor standing by the window that looked out onto the street, he pulled back almost immediately.

“Better,” he said, without sounding at all pleased. “But I still accessed plenty of information the Dark Lord could have used.”

Harry raised a trembling hand and wiped at his lip. He was sweating with effort, as if he’d really been pushing at a door.

“I think it’s going to take me time to get the hang of this,” he said. “Let’s go again.”

There was a flash of something—eagerness?—in Snape’s eyes, and Harry braced himself for the worst.

“Legilimens!”

Down the corridor . . . the long, dark corridor with the polished floor . . . where was he going? Disoriented, he tried to turn, but he could feel something drawing him forward. Down at the end of the corridor . . . down there was something he wanted. Something he wanted more than anything else in the world.

He tried to remember why he’d come, but he couldn’t. All his certainty was reserved for the end of the long, dark corridor, where waited the thing he wanted . . . no, needed. But it was only a door. Just a door. He had to open the door, that was all. He reached out his hand. Just open it, and behind it will be . . .

Harry sat up, thrashing at his sheets. He gasped for breath. He looked around in confusion, immediately throwing up the rudimentary barriers he was trying to employ against Snape. But he was met only by a warm, thick silence. He was in bed. He had the curtains drawn to sleep. He’d been dreaming.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. He didn’t even really remember getting here, but he must have done it. Somehow, with both mind and body exhausted after his lesson with Snape, he’d dragged himself up to his room and into bed. He wondered briefly if he’d said anything incriminating or embarrassing to any of his roommates, then remembered that he’d gone to the bathroom and cleaned himself up before he’d come in, so nobody would notice anything wrong. He’d said goodnight as usual, and gone to bed like everything was fine. So that was okay. It was just the dream that was unusual . . .

He lay back down, pulling the covers close. He didn’t think he’d ever seen that hallway before, but the desire to open that door had been overwhelming. He knew that dreams were almost always a subconscious manifestation of a person’s worries, but he couldn’t figure out what the door meant. What was his mind trying to tell him?

Chapter Thirteen

Small group tonight, Harry thought as he sat down at the scarred kitchen table. Of course, it would have to be for him to be allowed to be present, because John Rivers' underaged son couldn't put in an appearance at meetings for the entire Order. But this time, he had his own report to make. Dumbledore had already been informed, but it would be news to everyone else but Sirius.

"Wotcher, Harry," said a voice at his shoulder, and he turned to see Tonks grinning at him from underneath a thatch of shockingly blue hair. Harry wondered if she went to work that way, but he hadn't felt right about asking yet.

"Evening, Tonks," he said warmly. He liked her. He greeted everyone else a little more soberly, not sure about them yet.

For the most part, Harry sat silent and watched everyone else talk. Remus was chatting with the Weasleys, he seemed to be friends with them. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody (Tonks had been only too happy to let Harry in on the nickname) were deep into some conversation that apparently required lowered voices and frowns. Sirius cheerfully struck up conversation with Tonks, who was, he had informed Harry, actually his cousin, or maybe cousin once removed or something. Everyone looked comfortable with one another. They'd become a cohesive group while he was at school. But he was uneasy.

But then, Harry was feeling uneasy about every part of this situation. Dumbledore trusted Snape implicitly. After Harry's dream, he'd asked, and Dumbledore had said that he trusted Snape with his life—which Sirius had scoffed at plenty but not really argued. But it had still been the hardest thing he had ever done, ever, to let Snape into his mind and offer no resistance. But it seemed to have changed something between them. Harry didn't know what yet. All he knew was that Snape had stopped antagonising him quite so much. At least he understood the dream now, and that was really the point of this meeting, after all.

It seemed to be usual for Moody to call the meeting to order, which he did. Mrs. Weasley had come over and she and Remus had

cooked dinner for everyone while Sirius been supervising a detention. They ate while they talked.

“A very high percentage of the Auror department seems to be falling on our side of the debate,” Shacklebolt said, ignoring his meal for a moment to make his own report. (Harry didn’t see how he could, it was delicious and his estimation of Molly Weasley was skyrocketing.) “Many of them are recognising the signs for what they are.”

“Of course they are,” Tonks sniffed, waving her fork in illustration. “We don’t work with idiots. A bunch of his former servants are suddenly talking to each other again, Muggles are going missing . . . anyone with half a brain knows it isn’t random happenstance!” she said biting. She scowled down at her food. They were obviously feeling the pressures of working for people who didn’t share their views.

“Quite,” Shacklebolt said serenely. “We are doing everything we can to encourage that viewpoint, but it would be better if they would allow us access to the prisoner Pettigrew. He has not admitted to his activities of the past year, but no one trained for interrogation has ever questioned him.” Now it was Shacklebolt’s turn to scowl.

Harry wondered if they’d allow him access to Pettigrew. He ate silently, not mentioning it, but thinking about it. He could play the grieving party card. He could say that he wanted to confront the man who’d taken his parents from him. Which would, on some level, be true. He had every intention of doing that at some point. Having captured him was some satisfaction, but he still wanted to know why. However, if he was allowed to see Pettigrew, he’d use the opportunity to make him confess to having been in Voldemort’s personal service recently and having set up everything for that ritual when he discovered Harry’s return. But, Harry thought regretfully, that would be basically useless. They already didn’t believe that he’d personally seen Voldemort’s resurrection, why would they believe that Peter Pettigrew had confessed to him? He knew that Fudge was a paranoid fool and his closest advisors little better, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were refusing to believe him on principle, just because he was fifteen and not fifty. Where was the rule that said all teenagers were liars?

Or maybe they just thought he was unbalanced. Hah, well, he probably was that.

Now Sirius was reporting. "Obviously we've made it a bit easier to believe the truth at the school, there's a lot of trust between the professors and the headmaster. You lot have the worst of it, having to go against your boss, in essence. And then, several of the professors were around last time, too. It's the ones who weren't that we've been focusing on. Rolanda Hooch, the flying instructor, we've had a few good conversations, and I believe I've talked Pomona around as well. Aurora was basically a believer before we ever talked, apparently she's been seeing signs in the heavens for a year already, but don't mention it to Sybill Trelawney, whatever you do, she doesn't want to talk to her about it. Anyway, I'm not the one who's really been instrumental there, Minerva's been doing all the work while I try to stay on Umbridge's good side."

"Speaking of professors," Moody growled, "where is Snape? Doesn't he have a report to give?"

Harry had been wondering much the same thing. He'd counted on having Snape here to help him explain what was going on. It was Sirius who spoke up.

"We were planning to arrive together, but he . . . well, he has other business right now."

Voldemort called him, Harry thought. He repressed a shiver. Every time he thought about Voldemort, all he could remember was that slitted nose and those red eyes, eyes with no soul, eyes that if you looked into long enough you could feel yourself falling into a endless pit . . . He shook his head and stabbed at his vegetables, eating them with a certain viciousness. He'd better get over that if he was ever going to stand in front of the other wizard and not shit himself with fear while Voldemort leisurely killed him.

The discussion moved on, and Harry continued to delay what he had to say. He involved himself with enthusiasm in a discussion of what the student population thought about Voldemort's return, since he

had a lot more information than Sirius did on that topic. He even reported his concerns on Draco Malfoy's possible role as a spy, and Moody especially approved of him keeping the boy close, where an eye could be kept on him. Harry dragged it out, avoiding his real purpose at this meeting. He didn't know why, exactly. The prospect of standing up in front of all of them and revealing what a freak he was made him feel obstinate. When Mrs. Weasley started clearing up the dishes, and Sirius started staring at Harry, he knew he'd better get it over with.

He was almost too late. "We have one more order of business tonight," Sirius said, having decided to take care of it, like he'd wanted to from the beginning. It had been Harry's insistence that he would speak for himself.

"Yeah, I have something to say," Harry interrupted. They all turned to him, even Mrs. Weasley. He steeled himself to go on.

Then there was a loud cracking noise outside the door. Everyone jumped, and half of them grabbed for their wands. The kitchen door swung wide and Snape strolled in, his dark robes trailing.

"My apologies," he said smoothly. "Have you finished the meeting already?"

There was a short bustle of activity as Snape was drawn into the room, given a chair, and asked a few sharp questions. He didn't answer them. He also refused Mrs. Weasley's offer of food with bad grace. Harry paid attention. Mrs. Weasley looked hurt and a few others looked annoyed. Typical Snape, they all seemed to think. But Harry could see how pinched his face was, and despite his phenomenal ability to mask his feelings, Harry thought his curt refusal meant something besides poor manners. It was the food that was the enemy, not Mrs. Weasley. He'd seen something horrible just a few minutes ago. Something that had sickened him.

Moody, too, was looking at him carefully, Harry saw. He caught the signs of tension, but had Harry asked, Moody would have had a different explanation. It wasn't what he'd seen, it was what had been done to him. Moody interpreted it as signs of being in pain, and

concluded that Snape had been tortured, albeit briefly. Either explanation was enough to conclude that being in Voldemort's presence was in no way enjoyable to the spy, and both Moody and Harry felt a slight relaxation, becoming further convinced of whose side Snape was actually on.

"Harry was just getting ready to tell us something," Mr. Weasley said after a moment. "Did you have a contribution to the meeting, Harry?"

All eyes turned to Harry again, and he sighed. "Yes. I'm glad Professor Snape made it here, actually, it's to do with him, too. I don't know if you've all been told about my dreams last year . . .?" There were a few nods. "Right. It's been pretty obvious that Voldemort's mark on me has given us some kind of connection. I thought it was just annoying, but it's been pointed out that if he knew about it, he could use it as a weapon. The point is, Professor Snape has agreed to give me lessons in Occlumency."

There were a couple of mutters about that, but Harry couldn't pinpoint who'd spoken. Obviously he wasn't the only one who had misgivings about trusting his innermost thoughts to Severus Snape.

"We're just getting started, and I'm not very good yet. After our first session, I had one of my dreams. Professor Snape has looked at it very closely," he repressed a shudder, remembering what it had been like to have Snape in his head, "and we've talked about it with Dumbledore. We're very sure that Voldemort isn't aware of the connection and that he doesn't know I'm seeing what he's thinking about. We've also identified where I was, in the dream."

"Where you were?" Tonks asked, looking scandalised. "Isn't it more a question of what you were doing?"

Snape sneered at that. Harry found it amusing that he didn't reserve his disdain at dumb questions merely for his students.

"I see that information on the Dark Lord's whereabouts is not your top priority."

"Well, we've got you for that, don't we?" Sirius spoke up, perhaps in defense of his cousin or perhaps just because he'd never gotten any more fond of Snape's attitude over the years.

"No," Snape said sharply, drawing himself up and looking more intimidating. "I can be called to where the Dark Lord happens to be, but he does not yet trust me enough to give me the location of all his hiding places. He still tests me regularly."

Which was confirmation for both Moody and Harry of their personal theories on what Snape had been doing before coming here.

"Well, then, Harry has information on where he's hiding out?" Tonks asked.

"No," Harry said, exasperated and shooting Snape a dirty look. "I don't. The professor was making a point. What I have is confirmation of what he wants. All I was dreaming of was walking down a hall with a door at the end of it, which seemed pretty innocent to me. But this particular hall happens to be inside the Ministry, and happens to lead to the Department of Mysteries. I have apparently been kept out of the loop, but I've been told now what you all already know, which is that within the Department of Mysteries is a copy of the prophecy made about Voldemort and I. I had no idea that Voldemort didn't know the whole thing, but I guess he doesn't. And he wants it. We're not sure whose eyes I was actually seeing through, but stands to reason that it was someone Voldemort was controlling." And if that didn't sound slightly bitter, nothing did, Harry thought. He didn't like being left out of things. He did look at Snape, indicating that it was his turn.

"It is true that the Dark Lord is making plans to get a copy of the prophecy," Snape said. "He has said as much to me this very night."

It came to Harry with a flash of insight. He was one of the very few who knew it was Snape who'd given Voldemort what little information on the prophecy that the Dark wizard had. He'd been angry with Snape for not hearing the whole thing the first time. He'd been hurting Snape. He swallowed.

“So, that’s the only thing I really had to report. He still doesn’t know that I can sometimes see what he’s thinking, but there’s no guarantee that he won’t figure it out, so I’m working on getting that connection shut down.”

“See what’s he’s thinking,” Shacklebolt muttered, shaking his head.

“Am I the only one who thinks we should be keeping watch on Harry more often?” Arthur Weasley asked.

“No,” Remus muttered. Harry almost got very angry with Remus, but he knew well enough that Remus was concerned for Harry’s sake rather than considering him a danger to them. But still, Harry hadn’t got out of bed and started strangling his roommates or trying to leap out the window yet, so what was the cause for concern?

“And Dumbledore has made it clear,” Sirius broke in, drawing attention his way, “that one of our top priorities needs to be keeping the whole truth about this prophecy away from Voldemort. We’ve discussed putting a guard there, and with this news, we’re moving forward with that. Everyone in the Order is going to be given shifts keeping an eye out in the Department of Mysteries. We’re going to need to look at everyone passing through there for signs of Polyjuice disguises and Imperius curses. Severus will be excused from this particular duty,” he added, shooting a look at his colleague. “Since he can’t be compromised by actually opposing the Death Eaters.”

The tone of his voice was enough that Remus, who was sitting next to him, shoved a none-too-gentle elbow into his side while everyone was looking at Snape. But the eyes quickly returned to Harry, and he felt an awful hollow sensation, as though his insides had been scooped out. As if they were looking right through him and seeing everything that should have been his and his alone. There it was, what he was afraid of, those looks that said he was an anomaly and something to be studied.

Harry stood up. “Mrs. Weasley, let me help you with the dishes before I go. I have to get back to school soon.”

Mrs. Weasley's face softened as her mothering instincts kicked in. She seemed to know what was wrong, moving in behind him and shielding him from view as he carried his own plate to the sink. "No, dear, I can handle it, I'm sure you have plenty of schoolwork to do. Why don't you run along?"

That was almost too much, and Harry nearly choked on his gratitude. "If you're sure . . ."

"Yes, of course, dear," she said, patting his arm.

"Thanks for dinner, then, ma'am, it was wonderful. Sirius?"

"Keep your shirt on," he grumbled, standing up. "Come on, then."

They had to Apparate, since they were afraid Umbridge was watching the Floo entrances at the school and would ask uncomfortable questions about why Harry was allowed to leave school and go home whenever he liked. Of course, she was likely to have noted Harry's absence this evening in any case, but Harry could claim to have been in his dorm room, since she wasn't allowed into the student's living quarters—yet.

Harry said that Sirius just needed to drop him off at the edge of the Apparation wards and he could go back, since they were likely all hanging around discussing his godson's abnormalities, anyway. Sirius drew him into a one-armed hug as they walked up the path to the castle.

"Don't do that, okay?" he said quietly. "It's not your fault, and no one's going to think badly of you because of it."

Harry shrugged inside the embrace, not sure if he was trying to shrug off Sirius' arm or merely communicate his disagreement. It didn't matter either way, since Sirius didn't let go of him.

"I might as well walk you up and Floo from my office. That way the toad can't waylay you."

“Where was Dumbledore tonight?” Harry asked. It would have been so much easier to have Dumbledore explain the whole thing.

It was Sirius’ turn to shrug. “Not sure. He’s a busy man. He might have been meeting with other people in the Order, the ones who don’t know who we are. I know he was up to something with Hagrid earlier, that’s why Hagrid wasn’t there.”

“Poor Hagrid,” Harry said wistfully. Umbridge was coming down very hard on him, he was the only teacher who’d been subjected to a second observed class and Umbridge was making him out to be quite an idiot. It was the rest of the Order who concerned him at the moment, though. “Yeah, I guess somebody has to tell them the plan even if they don’t get to know all the details. Who’s in that part of the Order, anyway?”

“Oh, lots of people. Podmore, Vance, guy named Mundungus Fletcher who hangs out with the criminal types and keeps an ear to the ground for us—”

“You are making that name up,” Harry laughed, feeling assured that Sirius knew well enough all those people Harry hadn’t seen.

“Nope.”

“See, I always knew wizards had weird traditions, but that’s just wrong. Mundungus, honestly.”

“Feeling more grateful to your parents every day, hmm?”

“Yeah, but I’ll bet you do, too. At least your name is mostly normal.”

“I was always better off than my brother, anyway. Regulus thought he’d got the better end of the deal, you know, thought his name was more distinguished than mine.”

After that, they were both quiet as they made their way to Gryffindor Tower. Both of them were thinking about family. They’d both lost too much to bear, if it weren’t for the fact that they had each other, and

maybe it was because they were both thinking that that Sirius kept his arm around his godson until the stairs made it too difficult.

“Hey, um, Dad?” Harry ventured after a minute, not wanting to use his name now that they were in the school. “We’ve never had many pictures. Do you think . . .?”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Sirius said, giving him a wink.

“Okay . . .”

But Sirius wouldn’t explain, and Harry knew better than to try to force him. If he was keeping a secret from Harry, it must be for a good reason, since he so rarely did. But it did make him wonder. What secrets could there possibly be about pictures of Harry’s family?

Harry climbed through the portrait hole, wished Sirius luck with answering all the questions undoubtedly awaiting him back at Grimmauld Place, and then carefully drew on his Evan Rivers mindset. He pushed Harry Potter’s worries to the back of his mind, and started thinking about homework, and the fact that he had Quidditch practice tomorrow night, and that it was nearly time for bed. Nice, normal, student worries. When he felt sure he was firmly Evan Rivers again, he walked into the common room. It was getting late in the evening, but there were still plenty of students up.

Ron was playing chess with a sixth-year boy that Harry didn’t know very well, and Dean and Seamus were sitting with a small group around Fred and George, who were doubtless demonstrating one of their very clever experiments. They were always talking about having a joke shop to rival Zonko’s in Hogsmeade, but they were struggling to come up with the capital for it. Neville was in a chair in the corner alone, a textbook open in his lap. There was a group of fourth-year students sitting around one of the big tables having a study session, which Ginny seemed to be leading. One of them, a very annoying boy called Colin who had determined to document “Evan’s” progress as a transfer student with a camera, slipped away from the table and snapped a shot of him entering the common room.

Harry blinked at the flash, annoyed with the fact that it had got everyone's attention more than the fact that Colin never asked permission or the fact that he already had twelve photographs of him in the common room. He'd had enough attention for one night. He sighed, and crossed the room to go upstairs.

"Ron," he said in greeting when he walked past, just grateful that somebody was more interested in what they were doing than him.

"Where've you been all night, Evan?"

"Eating dinner at home," he said, wondering if Ron knew what his parents were up to, or that they, too, had been eating dinner in his home.

"Your dad lets you— never mind," Ron interrupted himself hastily.

Harry tried not to let his surprise show. "I'm just getting my bag, anyway," he improvised. "I've got to go to the library."

That answered that question, he thought as he hurried up the stairs. Ron did know that his parents were in the Order of the Phoenix, and apparently knew that John Rivers was as well. Now he knew that Evan had attended at least one of their meetings. That might even be a good thing, Harry thought, trying to be cautious about it. Ron would know how important it was, so he wouldn't go blabbing about it. But he might trust Evan a lot more than he would have otherwise. Either that, or start believing that Professor Rivers was a crazy person to be letting his fifteen-year-old son get involved in undercover work against a murdering villain.

Harry was left with little choice but to go to the library like he'd said he was going to do. There was less than an hour left before the library closed for the night, but he may as well start researching the properties of the Potion they were going to be brewing in class next week, so he'd be prepared when Snape started asking questions. He hadn't let on that he'd accidentally seen part of Snape's lesson plan when they were working last night. But then, Snape obviously didn't care if he did see it, or he would have kept it behind his very impressive mental shields.

When he asked Madam Pince for the book he wanted, she pointed toward the seating area.

“Miss Granger is using it at the moment, but I’m sure she’d share it with you.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Harry knew his voice was a bit flat, but he offered the librarian a good, convincing smile to make up for it. He didn’t know what to say to Hermione right now. They’d hardly spoken since their argument after the Quidditch game over the weekend. It had been several days since he’d seen her smile, and he was feeling absurdly guilty. He knew he should keep his distance. But he didn’t see how he could. He’d taken the initiative of befriending her, and now he was probably her closest friend. His quick retreat was a declaration that he didn’t trust her. He couldn’t imagine how angry she must be with him for walking away without a word. She deserved much better.

“Hi, Miss Hermione,” he said quietly when he approached her table.

Candlelight shadows played over her face as she raised it to him, making her look . . . well, magical.

“Evan,” she said frostily.

“Can I sit down?”

“I heard you and Madam Pince, you need the book. Go ahead, I’m finished with that one.”

“Can I sit down, please?” he amended.

She sighed, and nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and lowered his voice to a near-whisper.

“For what?”

“For what happened after the game on Saturday. I didn’t mean to—”

“I can’t imagine what you’re talking about, Evan. So we’re never to become best friends, that’s not a problem. You can still use the book.”

“Hermione,” he said firmly, “I’m sorry that I hurt your feelings. I know I did, and I didn’t mean to. I’m apologising because I care about you. If I didn’t, I would have left things as they were.”

Hermione’s face lost its thunderous look, but she was still holding herself back. It was written into every line of her defensive posture, with her arms crossed in front of her and her head drawn back.

“I know the problem is one of trust. I’ll tell you the very little bit that I can, okay? The rest of it is . . . well, it’s dangerous. I don’t know what you believe about You-Know-Who,” (he’d decided to call Voldemort that when he was at school) “but my dad and I think he’s a real threat, just like the headmaster does. My dad is part of a group of people that are keeping themselves secret right now, but they’re trying to counteract his influence. My secrets aren’t really mine, you see. I know who some of the people are and some of the things they’re doing. I have to be really careful that I don’t slip and say something where anybody could hear me. That’s why I tend not to talk about myself that much.”

He was telling less than half the story, and the little part he was telling her was misleading. But it was all he had to give her, right now. He didn’t think it was nearly enough and felt guilty for even bothering with it, but she seemed to have softened, somehow.

“I didn’t know you were involved in that,” she said, keeping her voice down like he had. She looked deep, deep in thought. She didn’t say anything for a long time, for long enough that Harry thought she was just waiting for him to give up and go away. He was reaching out to pick up his bag and go, feeling sick at heart, when she spoke again.

“Evan . . . is it true?”

“What do you mean?”

"Is . . . is You-Know-Who back, like they're saying? Those people your father is working with, do they really know?"

Harry felt an enormous wave of relief pour over him. She believed him, and she was taking it seriously. He should have known she'd take this whole subject more seriously than most of the students did, but for some reason he'd been afraid she'd laugh in his face and tell him it was all a big joke.

"They know," he said at last. "It's true."

Hermione shuddered. "I've read about him, about what he did. When he was in power, it was horrible. People were dying, especially people like—" she took a deep breath, "people like me. And I read about how he was defeated, without explanation, by that boy Harry Potter, but that nobody could be certain he was really gone. And with everything I've been hearing since the summer, I've wondered, but I didn't think anybody really knew."

Harry thought about how much danger she could be in. Everyone in the Order had accepted the risk brought on by their allegiances and activities. They all knew that they would be targeted by Death Eaters. Hermione could face that risk, too, if he told her too much. Not only that, but the vicious High Inquisitor would go after her if it got out that she believed it.

"I won't tell you anything more," Harry said, making up his mind. "It's too dangerous. But I think you've a right to know that it's true. It's starting to happen again, just like it did before. My father said that since we live here now, it's our problem, and he won't let things happen that way again. I'm not as involved as he is, but I know it's dangerous. I don't want you to know anything that would put you in harm's way."

Hermione frowned, but it was confusion, not upset. "And that's why you've been keeping me at arm's length? You do trust me, but you're afraid for me?"

Harry pictured it, for a moment. Telling her who he was. He could see her reacting with shock, with anger at his deception—and keeping it quiet. Holding his secret, however much she disapproved. If he confided in her, she would hold up her end of the deal, he knew she would. But what would it do to her? It was the kind of knowledge that could ruin her life as she knew it.

“Yes,” he said, and he was smiling, knowing that this much was true. He did trust her, after all. “That’s why.”

Then she was smiling back. “Evan, it’s okay. I understand.”

“You do?”

“If you think it’s dangerous for me to know what you know, then I believe you. I won’t push you to tell me. I was just afraid that . . .” She blushed, and didn’t speak.

“You were afraid that I wouldn’t want to, if I could?”

She didn’t answer.

“I trust you, Hermione. But let me protect you. There’s some nasty people out there who’d hurt you if they knew you were involved the least little bit. I don’t want that to happen.”

Hermione wasn’t smiling now, but her face was glowing in a way that the candlelight didn’t really explain. Harry thought his heart would burst directly out of his chest. He’d restored the friendship on the most solid terms he could, and she was looking at him like he’d done the right thing. They were talking again, and despite his misgivings about having close friends, he couldn’t regret it. She’d understand when he had to keep his distance. Dare he hope that maybe one day she’d understand why he’d lied about his identity? Yeah, that probably is too much to hope.

“You must think I’m so stupid,” Hermione whispered, lowering her eyes and beginning her retreat back inside herself, where she always went when she was nervous. “That I wouldn’t talk to you about—”

“No,” he interrupted. “You don’t have to, not if you don’t want to. I don’t want us to be friends based on certain conditions. I just want us to be friends.”

That seemed to be good enough. They had only a few minutes left in the library, but they bent their heads over the textbook Harry had come to borrow, feeling comfortable with each other again. Good enough for now.

Chapter Fourteen

The old man looked around the room, seeming to be very surprised by what it contained. His feet tread carefully around the edges of the floor mats, while his eyes took in the small set of shelves against the near wall, where they stored their protective gear, and which the radio sat atop. A ceremonial kimono held a place of prominence, mounted on one wall just above the pegs for their staffs, and a length of Egyptian cloth was hung like a banner from another. There were four Muggle photographs also mounted, unmoving but telling a story nonetheless; one pictured a small bespectacled boy with an old man whose eyes were milky pale with blindness, the second showed a group of musicians with a stunningly beautiful woman dancing in front of them on a crowded sidewalk, the third showed a large black dog nipping playfully at a wolf of even larger proportions, and the last showed a very recognisable teenager sitting at a simple dining table with a young blond woman, their bodies leaning into each other and very obviously laughing.

Sirius had been so pissed off when Harry had showed him the photo of himself, Harry remembered fondly when he saw Dumbledore's eyes light on it. Harry wasn't supposed to sneak out into the woods late at night to watch his godfather gambol around with mostly-tamed werewolves. Never mind that he'd been clutching the camera in his talons and transformed back into a person only long enough to snap the photo, then spent the rest of the night flying around as an owl. He supposed a vampire might have caught him, but Sirius had shown him how to deal with a hungry vampire.

This was their one personal, private space in the house, and now Harry was showing it to someone else—because the request for privacy could not be better met than in this room, and Harry had seen how serious the request for privacy had been. Even Remus knew better than to come in here. This was more than just a convenient space to keep perfecting their martial arts skills, this was their haven, where they could remember what they had been. With the others, they had to make excuses for leaving, try to apologise for staying away so long. But here, they could celebrate the life they'd lived. It had been a good life.

Harry was worried that allowing Dumbledore in here would somehow lessen what this room meant to him and Sirius. But when Dumbledore turned around, his sharp blue eyes were sparkling and a small smile quirked his lips.

"I have heard about the places you had been, but I had not seen the evidence of how happy you were there," he said.

Harry shrugged. "We never stayed anywhere long enough to get bored with it," he said, trying to sound like it didn't matter much. But the pain of knowing Two Rivers was dead, the feeling of being torn in half when he'd seen through Barty Crouch that Miguel and Catalina had run from their home, the bitter regret of having started something he couldn't finish with Anna . . . it all hurt like an ache in his chest. When he let himself think about it, anyway. He had to distance himself sometimes or he'd never breathe past the ache.

If it had been anyone else, he would have applied what he was learning from Professor Snape to mask it behind empty eyes, to show no weakness. But he trusted Dumbledore a great deal, he was coming to realise, and not only that, but he wanted the old man to know how happy he'd been with Sirius. If Dumbledore understood that, then maybe they'd have someone on their side when the others were saying how irresponsible they'd been. It was Dumbledore who'd given him to the Dursleys in the hopes that he'd have a real childhood. Maybe the one he'd had wouldn't be considered normal, but it had been good. Sirius had given him exactly what Dumbledore had wanted for him.

"I'm glad you have these memories," Dumbledore confirmed.

The ghost of a smile crossed Harry's face. He had no energy to make it anything more. "So are we," he said, including Sirius.

"You seem tired, Harry."

Harry gave him a level look. "Avoiding the High Inquisitor takes a lot out of me. Well, that, and we're days away from ending the first term and all the professors are laying it on pretty heavily. And there's Quidditch of course, and trying to find Christmas gifts, for that matter."

“And then there is the fact that no matter how late your studies keep you at night, you rise before dawn to run at least three laps of our Quidditch field and to practise what Sirius had told me are your ‘forms.’”

“Oh. You know about that, huh?” Harry said, not sure why he sounded sheepish, except that . . . “I guess you know Ginny Weasley waits until I’m finished, then does the same thing?”

“You sound as though you are not proud of inspiring your friend to something.”

Harry coughed. “Ah, well, she used to run with me, see, but . . .” He trailed off, looking for the words, and also wondering if this was really any of Dumbledore’s damned business, and thinking he probably knew all this already if he was so smart.

But Dumbledore had closed his eyes, for just a moment, looking weary. “It would be best if you told me no more,” he said, the words sounding each so separate and distinct that it gave the impression he was forcing them out one by one.

“What do you mean?” Harry frowned. As he’d begun to do, and do with Snape’s blessing, he threw up his best effort at mental walls the minute he felt uncomfortable.

“I hope you will believe me when I say that I regret this, but we will not be able to get to know each other better after this point,” Dumbledore said, looking at him again. “I had already begun to distance myself from you, and Sirius has been quite persistent that I need to explain my reasoning. He fears that you may take it upon yourself to get to the bottom of it, otherwise, and do something foolhardy.”

Harry, busy as he’d been, had hardly noticed, but he nodded. Now that he thought on it, he was aware that he hadn’t seen Dumbledore much in a few months.

“I fear it is only a matter of time before Voldemort becomes aware of your inadvertent mental connection, and he will seek to exploit it.”

“That is why I’ve been studying with Professor Snape. I’m trying to be sure I’m ready if that does ever happen, sir.”

“I know you are. But Professor Snape tells me it is slow going, and that you may not be ready in time.”

Harry wanted to protest that the only reason it was slow going was that every time Snape forced his way into Harry’s brain he took the time to sneer at Harry’s memories and point out all the weapons Harry had just handed him. But Harry was proud of himself. Snape had no idea about Catalina and Miguel, and no idea about Anna. Every time he got close to those memories, Harry shielded them from sight with focused memories of more innocuous meaning. His favourite was still Dudley the monkey. The association with the names made it only too easy to substitute his pet for his cousin when Snape got too close to realising how much Harry had hated the Dursleys.

“My point is this, Harry. Voldemort and I are very old enemies, and he may use you to get to me, if your shields against him are not strong enough. I do not think that either of us would like harm to the other on our consciences. But if Voldemort does not think we have any contact with each other, he may be less tempted to try to control you.”

Harry felt deep shock. He hadn’t considered this possibility. It really hadn’t occurred to him. He thought that Voldemort could get into his memories, use them to cause harm to his loved ones or even him, but . . . “He could really, uh, take me over like that? Force me to do something?”

“I don’t know, Harry, not for sure, but I suspect it is possible. Even if he cannot, he may try, and the damage to you might be great.”

Harry noticed that his breathing had gone fast and shallow, and his tongue tasted strange. He was going to throw up. He was really going to throw up on the floor of his sanctuary with the headmaster

watching him. Then he clamped his mouth shut and steeled himself. No. No, he wasn't. He was going to stay in control of himself.

"Sir, I . . . Shouldn't I be kept away from everybody? If that's possible, I could . . ." Harry didn't want to imagine the possibilities, but they were horrendous. He needed to be isolated, totally isolated until he could get a hold of his mind well enough to keep that from happening.

"No, Harry, I do not think so. I do not think the students of Hogwarts are a strong enough temptation for Voldemort to make such an experiment. There is the chance that it could cause harm to him, as well, you see. He is too cautious to use it unless he thinks it is truly worth it. And as you know, it is still a hypothetical scenario. He has not yet discovered the connection, and it may be that he will never do so. No need for panic just yet." The soothing voice was helpful, but Harry still felt fear twisting in his stomach.

"No, just need for me to apply myself even more to my Occlumency lessons," he managed to say dryly.

"I'm sure that you are trying your hardest."

Harry wasn't about to agree, since it would be a lie—he still did not have the ability to give total trust to Snape and so did not allow him into his mind enough to allow their sessions their full potential—but he wasn't about to admit to that, either, so he didn't say anything about it.

"Should I stop coming to these meetings, at least?"

"Not yet," Dumbledore said cautiously. "I think we will know if he discovers your connection and begins to take advantage of it. For now, he will trust that Professor Snape is bringing him accurate information."

"Oh, right, I guess he doesn't need me for that. Well, sir, if you think this is the right step . . ."

"Thank you for showing me this room, Harry," Dumbledore said, taking a final look around. His face was sad. "I am truly sorry for this,"

he added, and left. Harry knew that when he stepped through the door, it signaled the end of their ability to talk to one another for a long time to come.

Harry braced himself to exit the room, but the doorway was abruptly blocked. Sirius stood in the doorway and scrutinised him for a moment. Harry stood straight and calm beneath his gaze, giving no emotion away. He'd gotten himself under control, now. It was only that Dumbledore had surprised him.

Sirius stepped swiftly into the room, grabbing him into a tight hug and pulling Harry's head against his solid shoulder. "Don't you dare, Harry. Don't you ever close yourself to me, no matter what might happen."

Harry let out a shuddering breath. "I have to."

"No, you don't. If we ever have to deal with Voldemort taking over your brain, which I highly doubt because you're way too strong for that to happen, then at least we'll deal with it knowing that we never let him get between us. Right?"

Harry sighed. "Yes. You're right." He pulled away from Sirius and straightened up, giving him a brief smile.

Sirius scowled. "And you'd better not start thinking you're too old to get a hug from me, either."

That brought a warmer smile to him, and he tugged at Sirius' thick blond ponytail as he walked past him.

"Just too old to keep people waiting," he said, and entered the kitchen for the meeting feeling much better. Sirius followed on his heels.

Hagrid was creating quite a spectacle, Harry saw with a faint sense of amusement, despite how very not-funny the situation was. He had his face buried in the huge mug they kept around for him, and this time it was filled not with coffee but something a little stronger. He wasn't crying now, but his eyes were red-rimmed and slightly glassy with the remnants of shock. And everyone was flocking around him, murmuring comfort and sympathy, even though half of them didn't

have any idea what in hell was wrong yet. Mrs. Weasley was clucking around him like a mother hen, trying to be her usual nurturing self to the huge man, but he wasn't really responding to her or to anyone else. Remus was sticking loyally by his side, and for once his eyes weren't following Tonks around the room.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, calm and quiet as you please, but somehow everyone heard it and moved to their seats immediately. Harry himself did the same, but he was used to being under Dumbledore's charge and authority. Then he remembered that nearly everyone in this room had been a student at his school before they'd joined the Order and been a fighter under his leadership. No wonder they all scurried to their seats.

"Let us call this meeting to order, shall we?" he said pleasantly enough. "I suppose we may as well start with the news about Hagrid."

Hagrid moaned into his mug, then put his head down as though hoping no one would see him if he did.

"I'm afraid that the High Inquisitor at Hogwarts has exercised her authority against my professors again. She has chosen Hagrid as her second victim after dear Sybill Trelawney. She is unhappy with my insistence that both professors remain in their living quarters at the school, and she is most unhappy with my choice of substitution for Sybill, but Hagrid and I believe she will not have too much trouble accepting Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank's return."

"Ugly old toad," Harry said viciously. He liked Hagrid's class. They'd been learning about thestrals, which were fascinating even if he couldn't see them (and it would be all the same to him if he never saw them). But he couldn't deny he'd seen this coming.

"Mark my words, I'll be next," Sirius muttered darkly.

"And wouldn't that be a tragedy," Professor Snape sneered from his corner.

"You know she can't fire you, she'd lose her place at the school," Harry objected.

"No, but she can make my life plenty miserable, can't she? I've already been restricted to a damned useless curriculum. Now that she's got what she wants with Hagrid, she'll probably insist she needs to sit in on all my classes."

"Perhaps she's simply concerned that your teaching leaves something to be desired," Snape suggested. "You'll notice that she is not hounding the other teachers."

"And what do you call what she's done to Hagrid?" Sirius demanded, gesturing at the depressed giant, who moaned again and took another long draught from his mug.

"Leave Hagrid alone, would you, he's already had a hard enough day," Remus said, still standing beside him and shooting a dirty look at Sirius.

"You're right, Remus," Sirius replied tightly.

Snape opened his mouth, and Harry got the sinking feeling it was going to be something highly derogatory toward Remus, so he got there first.

"It's not really any of you she's after anyway, is it?" he said bitterly. "It's my fault all this is going on."

"Don't say things like that, Harry," Remus began to say.

"You may have forgotten, Lupin, you no longer work at the school and therefore do not know exactly what happens there," Snape cut in.

Harry noticed that the other people in the kitchen were staring at them with open mouths, but Dumbledore looked furious.

"Gentlemen!" he called out, his voice hoarse. "This is hardly the time for bickering!"

Chastised, they all settled back, nodding apologetically to their leader, but tempers were obviously still high.

"We are fighting for the same cause," Dumbledore said more quietly. "And right now, we are facing a great deal of opposition from the Ministry. They are taking over the school a day at a time, and that is not even the only problem we have. Personal problems can wait until after we have dealt with the more serious issues at hand."

Now the men looked ashamed of themselves. It was an improvement, Harry thought, and felt guilty for the small part he'd played in the argument. Dumbledore was right. Whatever rivalry Snape and Sirius had, it had to wait. However long it took for this all to be over with, it had to wait. Hell, maybe by the time the war was over, they would have learned to respect one another.

Not bloody likely.

After the meeting, while Harry was offering Hagrid his condolences and assuring him that he'd enjoyed having him as professor (and being rewarded with seeing a glimmer of Hagrid's usual cheerful self surface), he noticed that Dumbledore was speaking to Arthur Weasley with his hand on the younger man's elbow, nearly whispering. Harry wondered what it could be about.

"What's going on with Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked Sirius.

Sirius looked over briefly, just in time to see Arthur slip into the hallway to Apparate away. Mrs. Weasley was cleaning up the dishes, but she was banging them unnecessarily.

"His turn for guard duty at the Department of Mysteries," he explained simply.

"Oh." Harry chewed his lip, thinking. "Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's not that I'm not grateful you're keeping it safe, because I'd like to hear the whole thing, eventually. But, if Voldemort wants it so bad, why can't I just go and hear it and then destroy it? If it's not there, he

can hardly go after it, and then we wouldn't need to put anyone at risk."

"It's not that simple," Sirius said. He sighed. "Unfortunately. I wish you were right, but I have to agree with Dumbledore on this one."

"What's he say?"

"He says," came Dumbledore's voice from behind Harry, "that destroying the record of the prophecy will not rid us of the problem. It will make the people who know it in its entirety, rather than a small glass sphere, the target of Voldemort's desires." He lowered his voice. "Sybill Trelawney would be his next target."

"No wonder you're keeping her at the school," Harry muttered. "Hadn't thought of that."

"Even should we ignore the fact that only yourself or Voldemort has the ability to take it and therefore we had to wait for you to be here, I also suspect that we may need the orb to prove the prophecy's existence, later on," Dumbledore said. "There will be those we will need on our side who will not be convinced you are worthy of their protection if they do not know of the prophecy."

Harry shrugged at that, irritated by the idea. "If they don't think our side has its own merits, I don't see why we'd want them on our side." Then his thoughts were arrested. By the sight of Snape, standing on the other side of the room, but with his dark eyes sharp on Harry. Harry didn't think he'd heard what Harry had said, or he hoped not. There was at least one person who was on their side not because it had its own merits, but for very personal reasons. "Ah, you're probably right, sir."

Harry decided he'd had enough heaviness for one night, and went to talk to Tonks for a few minutes. She could be deadly serious when it came to her work, but when she wasn't on the job she was a lot of fun. Their conversations were full of jokes and making light of things, which was exactly what Harry needed just then.

When she tipped her head back and laughed, Harry couldn't help just looking at her with appreciation. Her hair was back to purple, which actually set off her skin tone and eyes very well, and her casual clothes—low-rise pants and a Weird Sisters t-shirt—were so much a part of her that he couldn't picture her in anything more dressy. Damn. If he didn't know for a fact that she would turn him down immediately (he couldn't exactly convince her that he was of age) he would totally go for her. Or maybe it was just that he hadn't had sex in a godforsaken long time and he'd go for anybody right now.

He did pull himself together and stop staring at her like that before she noticed him doing it, thankfully, but it was hard to get rid of the thought after he'd had it. It had been a really, really long time. This was why thirteen-year-olds weren't supposed to have sex. This was the reason, right here.

Harry found Sirius. "Take me back to school?" he muttered. Nothing would kill libido faster than the sight of Seamus falling out of bed and Ron's open-mouthed snores. But that thought led to wondering if Ginny snored in her sleep like her brothers did. No, she didn't, Harry decided, and she slept on her side with her hair spread out on her pillow . . .

"Good god," he muttered to himself, just before Sirius Disapparated them.

"What did you say?" Sirius asked as soon as their feet touched down at Hogwarts.

"Oh, nothing," Harry said faintly, letting out a deep breath. He really hated that method of travel. Maybe they should get a car. "I need to get to bed, that's all. I'm pretty tired."

"Okay, then. Want me to walk you up?"

"Aw, I can handle Umbridge, go back home. Make sure Hagrid's glass stays full tonight."

Sirius sighed. "Trying to get a drunken Hagrid upstairs to a bed is probably the last thing I could possibly want to do tonight."

Harry just smiled, knowing he'd do it whether he wanted to or not. Sirius was a good friend. Besides, Hagrid wasn't that much of a slosh.

Surprisingly, when he got up to the dormitory, he was ready to sleep. None of the other boys were asleep yet, but Harry climbed into bed without wasting time exchanging the usual few minutes of conversations, jokes, and roughhousing.

"Talk all you want, it won't bother me," he said before he closed the curtains on the bed. He thought he could sleep through anything right now. Apparently, getting up at dawn to exercise, avoiding Umbridge, keeping up with his heavy courseload, practicing Quidditch, looking for Christmas gifts, and ignoring his sex drive were wearing him out more than he'd thought they were.

Something soft tickled his cheek. He didn't open his eyes. A puff of breath escaped his lips, trying to blow the soft thing away. It didn't go. He shifted his arm, to raise his hand to brush it away, all the while trying to deny that he was awake, he just wanted to go back to sleep . . . his arm wouldn't move. He opened his eyes, and there she was. The soft thing on his cheek was her hair, smelling just slightly of coconut and shining in the morning sunlight, and his arm wasn't moving because she was laying on it. She had her back turned to him, but by her regular breathing he knew she wasn't awake yet. Smiling at his good fortune, he slid his free hand over her hip, reveling in the feeling of her smooth, soft skin.

It was time to wake her up. He nuzzled his face into her hair, using his lips and little whuffing breaths along her neck to rouse her. She slowly turned over, eyes drooping but a smile playing over her lips, sliding herself just so, so that his hand never left her but was moved to the opposite hip. She twined her legs into his while she raised her face to kiss him. Her kiss was sleepy and gentle, but he pressed harder, kissing aggressively. Looking surprised, but willing, she let out a low-pitched chuckle and pressed her body—

She was torn from him. No, he was torn from her. Anna still lay in her warm bed, smiling with drowsy pleasure, and he was flying away from her. He was in a hallway. A dark, polished corridor. Empty. He was

almost flat on the floor, and he was confused as to how he'd got there, but the confusion eased as he slid slowly forward. It was natural, comfortable, down here. This was what he did. He was going down the empty corridor toward the door—

No. Not empty. There was a person here, standing in front of the door. His back was turned, and creeping up behind him was so easy, so smooth, so silent. He never knew anything was there until suddenly he was screaming and falling to the floor, right there where it was easy to bite him. To kill him, because this was about killing. Get rid of the guard so the door could be opened. The door was what was important, behind the door was everything. Kill the little man who screamed in pain and horror, make him bleed—

“Evan!”

“Hey, Evan!”

“Come on, Evan, wake up!”

He came awake still screaming and thrashing, and saw Ron and Neville standing over his bed, but they looked strangely blurry around the edges. His head, oh sweet shit his head . . .

“I’m awake,” he gasped, clutching both hands to his forehead, feeling like it was coming apart, like it was splitting open. It wasn’t just throbbing, or stinging, or anything it normally was, it felt like the world was coming to an end and it has chosen his head as the place to crash down around them. He opened his mouth to reassure them again and instead felt the bile churning in his stomach rise up and—

He rolled to the side just in time to avoid sicking up on Neville.

“Uhhh,” he groaned, sitting up. He fumbled for his wand to clean it up, but Neville got there first. “Thanks,” he whispered, and tried to hold his head on.

Finally, it struck him. What he’d just seen . . . it had actually happened. Was happening, right then. He jumped up, and saw

Seamus and Dean blinking at him blearily from their beds, but looking just as concerned as the other two boys.

“Evan, you okay?”

“I feel really, really bad,” he said, which was not a lie at all. He threw on a t-shirt and decided that his fleece pants were good enough. Robes were just out of the question. “My head . . . I think I’m getting sick. I’m going to the infirmary.”

“You want someone to come with you?” Ron asked with a frown.

Harry was discovering that he really liked Ron, and what he’d just seen . . . he knew that if he opened his mouth he’d tell Ron everything, so he just shook his head and rushed out.

He didn’t go to the infirmary. He ran to Sirius’ office and opened it (Sirius had given Harry the password) and used the Floo to call. If he’d been comforting Hagrid, they were probably still up. Keeping it carefully in his mind that there were people about the castle this time of night, he tried to organise his thoughts and not give everything away to anyone who might hear him.

“Dad!” he shouted. He was still Evan Rivers, right now. “Dad, are you there?”

He only had to keep it up for a few seconds before Sirius and Remus both ran into the room, Sirius with soap suds dripping from his hands and Remus in pyjamas. They saw Harry and immediately dropped to their knees.

“I’m in your office, someone might be listening,” he said hastily. “Just listen. You need to get to the, uh, the department. It’s Mr. Weasley. He’s hurt.”

“How do you know?”

Harry’s frustration must have been clear, even through the fire, because Remus retracted his question with a muttered, “Oh, right.”

“When did this happen?” Sirius asked.

“Just a few minutes ago. He’s bleeding really badly, he needs help. I’m going to find Dumbledore right now, okay? I just think somebody ought to get down there right away. I’ll talk to you when it’s over.”

Harry saw them clambering back up and reaching for the pot of Floo powder on the mantel before his head was even fully retracted. He scrambled up and ran from the office, clapping his hand to his head again, even as a swoop of delight rushed through him. Voldemort thought he was home free, and he was thrilled with it. Harry stumbled on the stairs, but he made it to Dumbledore’s office, hoping with all his might that the headmaster would be there.

He didn’t know the current password to the office, but Dumbledore had shown him during the summer that touching his wand to the gargoyle would alert the headmaster to his presence. He did so, and waited impatiently. He touched it again, knowing that he hadn’t given it long enough but unable to help it. As he was reaching out to touch it again, the gargoyle sprang into action and the stairs came into view. Harry rushed up them, grateful beyond words that Dumbledore was there.

The lights were low, which was nice considering the state of his head. Dumbledore seemed to have been pacing. Fawkes, who’d been sleeping on his perch, raised his head and trilled softly.

“Harry?” Dumbledore asked, the question taking in his sudden appearance, his state of undress, the hand clutched to his forehead and the wand in his other hand, all at once.

“Headmaster,” he gulped. “I had a dream.”

Dumbledore took a step forward. “What was it?”

“Arthur Weasley’s been attacked. I told you about the huge snake Voldemort has, right?”

“You did.”

"It was the snake, he sent the snake to kill the guard so he could get to the prophecy." Strange how he felt okay talking about all this plainly now that he was in the headmaster's office. He trusted that Dumbledore had the strictest wards in place on this room. "I think he's dying, sir. I already called Sirius, and he and Remus are on their way there now, they'll take care of it. I thought you needed to know right away, of course, but his office was on the way and I thought you might ask him to anyway. And . . . and . . . the Weasley kids. They'll need to know, but I couldn't tell them myself. How would I explain?"

Harry didn't even know how hard he was breathing and how badly he was rambling until Dumbledore placed a gentle hand on his arm. He shut up, and looked at the headmaster with tortured eyes.

"You've done well, Harry. Very well. Thank you."

"Yes, sir," he said, trying to lower his voice and calm down.

"I will certainly inform the Weasley children, after I speak to Molly. She has a very admirable clock, I am certain that she already knows something has happened. It will be taken care of, I assure you. Thank you for your quick action." He frowned. "are you in pain, Harry?"

"It's better now," he said dismissively. That was hardly the relevant point, was it? "I'll be fine, it's just that the scar hurts when the connection opens up."

"Yes, I recall that you told me something like that, but . . ."

But this seems worse, was what would come next, and Harry knew that he was probably making too little of the problem, but Dumbledore appeared to take him at his word, and said nothing more about it.

"Why don't you sit in here and have a cup of tea," he offered, "while I go see what I can find out? I will have Minerva speak to the Weasley children . . ."

The fire flared up, and Sirius' face appeared in it. "Hello?" he barked out, his voice anxious and his eyes rolling around the room until they lit on Dumbledore.

“How is he?” Dumbledore wasted no time in asking.

“He’s pretty badly off, but we think we got him to St. Mungo’s in time. He’ll make it. We tried to get the snake, but it got away. Voldemort wasn’t there at all. We stopped him this time, sir.”

That there would be a next time didn’t seem to be in question, Harry noted. He hoped they doubled up the guards from now on. He still thought they ought to destroy it. Professor Trelawney would be safe here, wouldn’t she? It occurred to him that he ought to have asked before now who else Voldemort might target, but now was hardly the time. They’d deal with all that once the crisis was averted.

“Thank you, my boy, thank you. I will need to speak to the rest of the Weasley family now, and I think we ought to—”

“Remus and I will stay here at the Ministry, sir. Just in case.”

“Ah, that will do nicely, thank you.”

Sirius turned his eyes to Harry. “Are you all right?”

Harry nodded.

“Do you want me to come back to the school? Remus can handle this, if you need me.”

Harry pulled up a small smile from somewhere in the remnants of himself that still remembered how, and shook his head. “I think I’ll take the headmaster up on his offer of tea, but I’m fine, I really am. Stay with Remus, just in case. I’ll go back to bed in a while and talk to you in the morning.”

“Okay,” Sirius said, not smiling any better than Harry did. “Headmaster, when you are speaking with the Weasleys, please be sure to mention that the house is free for their use. I know it will be much easier to go back and forth to St. Mungo’s if they have a place to stay in London.”

“That’s generous of you,” Dumbledore said. “I will be sure to mention it. I shall speak to you again soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then Sirius was gone, and Dumbledore only a minute after that. Harry curled up in a chair in front of the headmaster’s desk, clutching a cup of tea like a lifeline and feeling more wretched than he’d ever felt in his life. Fawkes rustled in the corner, and Harry looked up at him. He made a soft noise, but it was the only sound in the dark room. Harry stared down into his tea, but he couldn’t drink it. His stomach wasn’t ready to handle anything.

But he couldn’t put it down, not until he stopped feeling so cold.

Chapter Fifteen

Harry had decided, clutching the cold tea with Fawkes watching him intently, that the only way to avoid suspicion from his roommates was to actually go to the infirmary and claim to be ill. Lucky for him, Dumbledore had found it prudent to inform Madam Pomfrey at the beginning of the year that she may need to take part in a few fabrications where Professor Rivers and his son were concerned. Less lucky was the fact that when he arrived, Madam Pomfrey declared that no fabrication was necessary.

"I'm actually sick?" Harry asked in surprise. He didn't feel sick.

"You told me yourself that you had a migraine so terrible it caused you to vomit, dear boy," Madam Pomfrey said sternly. Harry had learned when he'd gotten his concussion in late spring that she brooked no nonsense. "I will give you a pain-relieving potion, and I will keep you overnight to ensure that it is not a manifestation of a more serious condition. Are you prone to migraines, do you know?"

"I don't think so," Harry said, but he shrugged. "It's possible." It was also the perfect explanation should a situation like this arise again. He would be able to hide out under Madam Pomfrey's care for a day or two anytime it was needed, claiming a migraine. Of course, if something like this happened again, it wouldn't be a lie, would it?

Harry didn't want to go back to sleep, even though he followed the mediwitch's directive and lay down on one of the beds. This was his second time sleeping here this year, he thought with a frown. Better not make it habit . . . He resolved himself to staying up until he could see Sirius. He'd find something to read, maybe. But he wasn't about to get sucked back into another dream, not without someone there to wake him. He really did not want to go through that again.

Madam Pomfrey had a tendency to mix a mild sedative into her pain relievers. In general, it was a good policy, since nothing healed the body quite as well as peaceful rest. But when Harry felt himself getting sleepy in spite of himself, and realised he'd been given some kind of sleeping agent, he was furious and frightened. He tried to fight off sleep, but it was a losing battle. It was the middle of the night, after

all. One minute, he was silently raging (well, trying to rage, but he kept losing the train of his thought) and the next he was cracking open one eyelid to see how bright was the sunlight falling over him from the high windows.

He sat up in sudden outrage, meaning to give Madam Pomfrey a piece of his mind, but his mind was quickly overtaken with other concerns. Was Mr. Weasley alive? Had Sirius and Remus been attacked? What had the Weasley family been told?

Not only was it the second time he'd been forced to stay overnight here, Harry thought with grumpiness, it was the second time he'd fretted away the morning waiting for Sirius to show up and explain what he'd missed while laid up by stupid head problems.

It wasn't Sirius who came to answer his questions, however. It was Ron Weasley, who walked in with slow footsteps and a pale face that gave Harry half of the information he needed before he ever spoke.

"Hey, Evan. Are you feeling any better?"

Harry gave him a weak smile. "Yes, actually. Madam Pomfrey said it was just a particularly bad migraine headache. Sorry if I worried you guys. But Ron, you look awful, mate." Well, no shit, there, Harry, he thought to himself sarcastically, but he had to pretend that he didn't know what was wrong. How would he explain his foreknowledge, if he'd been sleeping here all night?

Ron looked down at the floor. "Right. Thing is, Evan, you're not the only one in the hospital."

Harry made sure that he looked around the otherwise empty room in confusion. "I'm not?"

"It's my dad," Ron said, his voice quiet, looking around much as Harry had to make sure there was no one to listen. "He was doing something for, you know, for the Order last night and he was attacked."

Harry gasped on cue. "Is he okay?"

"Not yet, but he will be," Ron answered. "Thing is, your dad's pretty busy this morning with classes and everything, so I said I'd come tell you what's happening. I know your dad is part of the Order like my dad is, and I know you've gone to some of their meetings." He looked pretty jealous about that, actually. "Anyway, so I guess your dad was the one who helped get mine to the hospital, and we've been up all night waiting for word about him. They said he's going to be okay, but he'll need to be there for almost all of our school break, so your dad said we could stay at his house . . . your house."

"Stay with us? Oh, right, I guess we are pretty close to St. Mungo's," Harry said, still acting like this was news to him. "Merlin, Ron, I'm glad your dad's okay." That much was totally sincere. "I'm glad my dad made the offer."

Ron gave him a very brief smile. "He wanted to come talk to you first, he said, but he's pretty busy after he spent all night helping Dad and uh, doing whatever Dad was doing. I've been excused from classes because of the family emergency, and I've just finished packing my trunk. So we'll all be there at your house when you finish with classes in a couple of days, thought you ought to know that. Sorry."

"Naw, it's fine," Harry protested. "My dad and I were getting pretty tired of having such quiet holidays, anyway. I mean, not that it's brilliant about your dad or anything, but there might end up being a bright spot in all of it."

Ron smiled again, although it was very worn. "Yeah, maybe." He frowned in thought. "Your dad also said that he doesn't live there alone, that the professor we had for his class a couple of years ago lives there now."

"Yeah, he does," Harry agreed, stretching his arms over his head. He was feeling perfectly fine now, to be honest, and he was ready to get out of here. Too bad he'd have to wander the school in his nightclothes with no shoes on. Well, it wasn't his place to explain how Remus had ended up living at Grimmauld Place, but it would look weird if he didn't say anything about it. "He's the one who showed my dad and I around when we first arrived, and he and my dad have a lot

in common, both of them being Defense professors and all. I heard you were just about his favourite student, that you did really well in the class.”

Ron flushed at the praise and shook his head. “What? No I wasn’t, who said that?”

Harry grinned. “He did, you dunce. See, there’s a bright spot for you, you’ll get to see him again.” He sat up and put his feet on the floor, gauging the state of his head. It seemed fine. “Hey, walk with me back to the dormitory, would you? I guess you’ve got to get your trunk anyway, and I’m ready to get out of here.”

Madam Pomfrey had been kind enough to give them some privacy for their conversation, but when she saw Harry padding out of the room in his bare feet, she got a panicked look and rushed forward.

“Don’t you leave until I check you over!” she squawked.

Harry just waved at her cheekily. “Thanks for your help last night, ma’am. I’m feeling totally better.”

He slipped out, both he and Ron chuckling at the incoherent noises of outrage the mediwitch was making. As suspected, Harry got a few funny looks from students who were walking between classes, but Ron’s presence was sort of a buffer against any intrusive questions. Apparently, one person acting like things were normal made them so. Huh. If only that were always true.

To Harry’s surprise, the house was quiet when he Flooed through. He stepped through the fireplace with his arms around several textbooks and his toothbrush. He had plenty of everything else he might need already here at the house, so he hadn’t bothered packing.

“Ah, there you are.”

Harry spun around at the voice, clutching his wand in spite of himself, but the voice belonged to Remus, who was sitting alone in the room, reading something.

"We were beginning to think you'd got lost," he said mildly, looking faintly amused.

"No, I was just, well, saying goodbye and all," he said, trying not to trip over his words. He hadn't expected saying farewell to Hermione for a few weeks would be so difficult, they'd ended up talking for close to an hour before he finally excused himself to go to Sirius' office and Floo home. Hermione was taking the train back to London so her parents could pick her up, she'd said, and then they were going to stay in a rustic cabin for the holiday and ski. Harry, facing the prospect of four noisy teenagers, a tense and worried atmosphere, and members of the Order popping in and out all day long, had wished fervently that he were going with her.

"Anyway, I'm here now," he said dismissively, ignoring the knowing expression Remus was giving him. "Why's it so quiet?"

"The Weasleys are at the hospital with Arthur," Remus explained. "Sirius is upstairs, but I think he's taking a nap. He's determined that the holiday is going to be quiet and peaceful and cosy. He's forbidden me from looking for work for the next two weeks, by the way. He thinks I have trouble relaxing."

Harry observed that Remus was looking as tired and ill as ever, and privately agreed with Sirius. "Well, he probably won't let me study, either, so I guess we'll all get to take lots of naps," he grinned. He spied a chessboard set up in the corner, looking as though it had been abandoned in the middle of a game. "What's this?"

Remus shrugged. "I've been playing a game with Ron, but we had to leave it while he went to see his dad. We used to play sometimes when I was teaching at the school and didn't have class work to see to. It was funny, he seemed so pleased to have the opportunity again."

He always said things like that so casually, Harry thought, turning his head toward the fire to hide his face. Like it was no big deal, like it didn't reveal that he was one of the loneliest people Harry had ever known. He had spent the last fourteen years with no family or friends, and the only person who'd so much as played a game with him was

one of his students. Harry knew Remus would be utterly mortified if he thought Harry felt pity for him, but it wasn't really that. It was just that Sirius, too, had been lonely for so much of that time, and only having Harry in his life had saved him. It had been especially hard on Sirius ever since they'd left Brazil. He hadn't seemed to get close to anyone after that.

But Harry had been here often in the short time since Remus had moved in. They both seemed so much happier. They made sure the place stayed hospitable as the base of operations for the Order, but they also came up with really weird things to cook, and sat around discussing in minute detail every article about Voldemort in three different publications, and talked about the lessons Sirius could give when they got rid of the toad. They'd even decorated the house for Christmas, which was really nice, since it had seemed sort of barren after they'd stripped it of all the Dark objects (which left almost nothing but the furniture). They were friends, good friends, and Harry was thrilled that Sirius had been able to resurrect some of the happiness he'd had as a young man. Harry had been afraid they'd never find anyone they could call family after Miguel and Catalina were gone, but Remus did seem like family, to him.

"Harry, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just thinking."

"What about?"

"How glad I am to be home," he said, finally looking away from the fire with a smile on his face. He pointed to the evergreen branches that framed the mantel, decorated with tiny candles that were currently not lit. "This looks great. And don't tell me you didn't do most of it, because I know Sirius and he so did not do all the decorations."

Remus was practically glowing, although his smile was small and private. "I won't say I didn't come up with most of the ideas, but he was the one who wanted to do it. He was very enthusiastic, even if most of his ideas were horrific."

Harry walked toward the door. "Is there really a Christmas tree in the big drawing room?"

"There is," Remus said, and decided to show him all the things they'd done. They walked down the hall from the study to the larger room. "See?"

"Wow, there's actually a Christmas tree," Harry said, impressed.

"You act like you haven't seen one before."

"I've seen plenty of them, we just haven't ever had one." He went out into the hall again to look at the garland wrapping the banister of the stairs. "Merlin, this place looks so much better without the shriveled elf heads."

He and Remus shared a moment of repulsive memories of the day they'd cleared out the shrunken heads of past household servants. They both shuddered a bit, then Harry declared that he was starving and went into the kitchen. There was a wreath on the door of the pantry and there was something cooking unattended on the stove. It smelled heavenly.

"Ah, I see you've discovered the best part of having the Weasley family here," Remus said. "Molly's cooking. Honestly, I think Kreacher's starting to feel unnecessary around here."

Harry looked around curiously. "Where is he?"

"Probably cleaning your room," Remus said. "He likes you a lot better than he likes Sirius and I, and after all the time you had him helping you over the summer, he thinks you're obsessed with cleaning things and he's taken to dusting and polishing the furniture in your room every day."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I knew he was nuts after he was alone here for so long. Not that I'm complaining, exactly, I think I am sort of a neat freak. But that's my aunt's fault, anyway, I don't think I did anything but clean when I lived there."

An oddly guilty look flitted over Remus' face, but it was quickly gone. "Don't get too excited about cleaning, I'm sure Sirius won't let you do anything resembling work."

Harry sat down at the table, and leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the table. He lazily flicked his wand, muttering the necessary spells to bring a packet of crisps zooming out of the pantry and into his waiting hands. "And that is something I'm definitely not complaining about."

He heard voices in the hallway, and quickly put his feet down on the floor.

"Weasleys are back," Remus observed.

They spilled into the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley heading up the clan as she made a beeline for the stove to check whatever she had in the pot. The teenagers followed, but it took them a minute to notice that they weren't alone.

"I don't know what Percy's problem is, honestly . . ."

"You'd think he'd at least come see Dad . . ."

"At least he's doing better, doesn't look like death warmed over anymore . . ."

Harry loudly crunched his crisps, and eyes slowly turned his way and saw he and Remus there at the table.

"Oh, hi," Ron said affably.

"Evan, long time no see," George said, clapping him on the back.

Ginny didn't say anything.

"You finished the term without any trouble, then, Evan?" Mrs. Weasley asked, turning from the stove for a moment.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, thank you."

“Ron mentioned you’d been ill, so I hoped you wouldn’t have to miss anything. I made the boys promise to study over the holiday since they missed some.”

“They didn’t miss much,” Harry muttered, thinking about how tame the classes had been ever since Umbridge’s regular inspections had begun. “Whatever you’re making smells fantastic, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Potato chowder,” she explained. “It’s awfully cold out, we all need something that will stick to our ribs.” She eyed Harry with consternation. “You especially, dear. You look like you’ll waste away in a moment!”

“Not if I get to eat your cooking, ma’am,” he assured her.

“Oh, go on,” she said with embarrassment, obviously pleased, and turned back to her soup. “It’s just about time to add . . . hmm . . .” she started muttering to herself.

The boys were all sitting down at the table, though Ginny had disappeared.

“Nice one, Evan,” Fred said—Harry could tell them apart now because Angelina had made Fred cut his hair.

“Yeah, now she’ll make you all kinds of stuff.”

“True, though, she is a great cook.”

They passed around the bag of crisps while Remus got up to assist Mrs. Weasley with the next phase of preparation.

“So, I guess your dad’s doing better?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, loads better,” Ron confirmed. “They’re trying a new thing on him tomorrow, they might be able to close the wound up. See, the venom in the snake’s fangs is doing something to keep it open, they’re still working out a solution.”

Harry remembered the fangs, remembered sinking them into Mr. Weasley's leg, remembered the blood . . . He shuddered. "I hate snakes," he explained when he saw them all looking at him.

"I don't think Dad's their biggest fan, either," Fred smirked.

It was quiet for a minute as they all thought about how close he'd really come to dying a few nights ago. Mrs. Weasley was comparing different types of onions for Remus' benefit, so it was obvious they weren't listening to what the teenagers were saying.

"I guess Professor Lupin is part of the Order, isn't he?" Ron asked in a very quiet voice. "I mean, he'd have to be, since he knows what happened to Dad."

"Yes," Harry answered, also quiet.

Fred and George were both frowning at him. "How d'you know that? Nobody ever tells us a thing about the Order."

"Oh, thought I told you," Ron said, sounding casual. "His dad let him come to one of the meetings."

"Wicked," said Fred.

"How did you manage that?" George asked.

"Yeah, how did you?" Ron added.

Harry shrugged. "I've been pretty well-prepared in Defense, and my dad's always been really honest with me. He told me all about what they were doing, and I guess he trusts me to hold my own in a fight, if it ever came to that. They don't let me do anything, mind you, I just get to listen."

"You go to all the meetings?" Ron gasped.

"Oh, no, of course not," Harry said. "I've only been to a few."

"Well?" George asked. "What are they doing?"

"All kinds of things. Your parents really didn't tell you anything?"

"They think we'll nearly get ourselves killed again like we did in third year. They're trying to keep us out of it."

"Despite the fact that we're of age now," Fred added importantly. "They can't actually stop us from getting involved. So, what do they talk about at the meetings?"

"Well, Hagrid got sent to liaison with the giants over the summer, but that didn't go well, so he's just been teaching since he got back. And the Aurors who are part of the Order spend a lot of time talking to the other Aurors, trying to convince them that You-Know-Who is back so that they won't get surprised while they're out on patrol or something. They keep an eye on the people who were suspected of being Death Eaters last time. They've got a sort of shady fellow working for them who lets them know when Dark objects change hands and tries to overhear anything he can among his contacts. And then there's Professor Snape, of course, he gives reports pretty often."

"Professor Snape? Reports on what?"

"On You-Know-Who," Harry said, trying not to enjoy how much more information he had than they did, and how their eyes kept getting wider and more surprised. "Snape's been getting further into his trust all the time. He's gotten close enough that he's started hearing about plans in advance, and I think the Order's been able to stop a couple of attacks on Muggleborn wizards recently."

"Whoa."

"So he's . . . he's really back, then? Mum and Dad seemed very sure, but they never told us how they knew."

"Well, that's how," Harry said, just as Sirius entered the kitchen.

"Hello, everybody, how's Arthur?"

“He’s doing much better,” Mrs. Weasley answered. “I still don’t know how to thank you two,” she added, talking to both Sirius and Remus and getting a little teary-eyed.

“Oh, there she goes again,” Ron groaned.

“Nonsense, Molly, I know he’d have done the same for me,” Sirius protested. “Mmm, that smells wonderful. Merlin, how long was I asleep?”

“Long enough for me to arrive, see all the decorations, and spoil my appetite for dinner,” Harry answered from his place at the table.

Sirius crossed the room and gave Harry a quick hug. “Oh, good, you’re here,” he said. “Welcome home.”

“Remus tells me no one’s allowed to do anything resembling work for the next two weeks.”

“That’s right,” Sirius answered with mock severity. “I expect nothing but the best from you, young man. Lazing about in your pyjamas all day, letting your books collect dust, eating Molly’s homemade fudge until you burst, and no less than twenty games of Exploding Snap.”

“I don’t know how I’ll survive,” Harry muttered.

“What are you doing in here?” Sirius asked, standing in the doorway of the study. “I said you were to let your books collect dust, remember?”

Harry looked up from his reading and gave Sirius a ghost of a smile. “I just wanted to be alone for a while.” He was reading the textbook Sirius had assigned to his class at the beginning of the year, before Umbridge had changed the curriculum.

Sirius came over and ruffled his hair, which he would insist on doing. “Neither of us are used to having so many people around all the time,” he said. “My fault, probably. We’ve always kept to ourselves. Still, you must be getting used to it by now, after a whole term in such close proximity to the other students.”

Harry sighed. He refused to explain why he really wanted to be alone, and so he let Sirius make his assumptions. "I guess I am used to it, but I still like to get away sometimes."

Everyone else was in the bigger room, eating popcorn and listening to the holiday broadcasting on the radio. Kreacher had finally found some reason to be useful, but he seemed just as sour as ever as he shuttled around making and handing out popcorn.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Sirius said, giving Harry a pat on the shoulder. "I just wanted to check on you."

"I'm fine, but thanks," Harry said, returning to his reading. After a bit, hearing the sounds of festivity in the other room dying down, he decided to go up to his room. They had one spare room, which Ginny and Mrs. Weasley were sharing, while the three boys were sleeping in the drawing room, leaving Harry with his own room.

The door opened before he reached it, though, and Harry wondered with a slightly exasperated amusement if Sirius was checking on him again. It was Ginny, though.

"Oh. Hello," she said cautiously.

"Hi."

"Your father said I could poke around in here and see if there was a book I might want to read," she said, her manner reserved.

"Oh, go ahead, I'm just leaving," Harry replied.

"I didn't know you were in here, I thought you'd gone to bed or something."

"I'm going there now," he shrugged.

"Oh. Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight." He started to walk past her. "Ginny?"

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh. Evan?”

“What?”

“Goodnight, I guess.”

Harry was almost through the door before she said it.

“No, wait.”

He turned.

“I never told you that I’m glad you’re on the team. You’re the best flyer I’ve seen, even better than my brother Charlie. Angelina was right.”

“Thank you.”

He didn’t know how they’d gotten to be standing so close together. He didn’t remember stepping back into the room, but he had, a few steps. She’d stepped toward him, too, and the flickering light was making her hair look like pure red flame.

“I feel bad about the way I stopped talking to you. I was mad, but . . . we all have to live in Gryffindor together, right?”

“Right,” Harry nodded, remembering that the last time he’d been thinking about sharing Gryffindor Tower with her, he’d been wondering if she left her hair loose while she slept. That was the wrong line of thought, it really was.

Somehow, without him noticing it, she’d put her hand on his chest. It was now very slowly sliding up his chest for some reason. Harry took a step backward, and her eyes flashed with hurt and anger.

“So I’m still not good enough for you, is that it?”

“What? I never said that.”

“It’s Hermione Granger, isn’t it? If she were here, you wouldn’t be walking away, would you?”

“Hermione?” he asked in confusion. “What’s my friend got to do with it?”

“Oh, please,” Ginny snorted. “Your friend.” Then her eyes went to hurt again. “Well, if it’s not her, then it’s me. It’s just that I’m still too arrogant for you, am I? Well, you may not have noticed this, but I’m not the only one in the room with that problem, Mister Goes and Makes Friends with Other Houses, like no one’s tried that before or something, and going around acting like you’re the best student Hogwarts has ever seen just because you’re good at Potions and Defense coursework, and going running all the time so that you’ve got this hot body for the girls to look at from a distance but never actually get close to any of them . . .” She trailed off, furious. “I’m good at Defense, too, you know, and I’ve gotten into great shape, and I hang out with Cho Chang and Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw all the time. And yet somehow, I’m still not good enough for you. Well, that’s just terrific.”

“Have you ever considered that it might not be you at all? It could just be my problem,” Harry said slowly, carefully, controlling his temper. What exactly was it that she was accusing him of? Not noticing that they were similar people, on the surface? Well, he had noticed. He just . . . didn’t think she was the right person for him. And while he certainly found her pretty, he also felt like he’d be robbing the cradle to get involved with a totally inexperienced fourteen-year-old. Nor was that even the real problem. The real problem was that he needed to keep away from people, try to keep them safe, not get closer to them and make them a target for Voldemort.

“It’s not you, it’s me,” she huffed. “Oh, that’s rich.”

She went storming out of the study, apparently forgetting that she had been looking for a book to read. Harry remained there for a couple of

minutes, giving her plenty of time to retreat before he exited. In the meantime, he fretted over the incident. What was he supposed to have done? Snogged her senseless and felt guilty about it? Was it such a crime that he didn't want to date her? Wasn't there any other boy in the whole school she could set her cap for? She didn't even like him, how could she possibly want to kiss him? She was so infuriating sometimes.

He tried to give her the benefit of doubt. It had been a rough few days for the family, after all. She must have been feeling really awful about her dad, and she was tense. But did that really excuse blowing up in his face because he wasn't going to take advantage of being more sexually experienced than she was?

He sighed, and took his book upstairs. He sat down on his bed. He didn't undress or get into the covers. He just sat and read. He didn't want to go to sleep. In sleep waited dreams, and in dreams waited blood and horror and pain. In his dreams, he hurt people. In his dreams, he was the enemy.

Sirius frowned at Harry across the table. Harry was leaning on his hand, picking at his breakfast and looking listless. Maybe Harry was pretending that he was still a bit ill, for the Weasleys' benefit. But if so, he was doing far too good a job of it. He looked very tired. Maybe he'd just stayed up too late reading. But that didn't explain why he was so withdrawn, either, and not eating.

Harry seemed to sense the eyes on him, and looked up at Sirius. "Dad? Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," Sirius said with a frown. "Now?"

"After breakfast is fine," he said, but he didn't eat anything, just stirred his eggs around his plate and drank a cup of coffee and assured Mrs. Weasley that the food tasted great. Sirius finished his own food in a rush and excused himself from the table, going directly to their practice room. He'd taken the initiative of warding the room with silencing spells quite a while ago, after Remus had his first absolute heart attack and rushed in to stop them from killing each other and

found them laughing at Harry's bloody nose. They could talk in here without being heard and without interruption. It was their sanctuary.

Harry entered only a minute later.

"What's wrong?" Sirius wasted no time in asking.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure it's wrong, exactly." He sat down cross-legged on the padded mat, seeming not to be disturbed, just tired. "It's just that I've been thinking about Voldemort quite a bit over the last few days. I could hardly help it, right?"

Sirius didn't know how Harry managed to say the exact thing that could send him plunging toward panic so often, but he did have the knack. He curbed his emotions and said simply, "I guess I can understand that. Go on."

"I'm just thinking about the people that Voldemort might go to if he was looking for information about me. If he was going to do that, the really logical choices are you, Dumbledore, and Snape, but I'm not worried about any of you. If he has any eyes in the school, he'll know that none of the students could help him. The only other people—"

"Merlin, Harry, you oughtn't be thinking like this, it's awfully morbid," Sirius scolded, feeling his heart aching for his godson. He hadn't meant Harry's life to take this turn. He hadn't wanted Harry to have to think about his life in these terms.

"The only other people I can think of," Harry went on as though Sirius hadn't interrupted him, "are the Dursleys. He'll know that's where I lived for half my life, and he might go after them. I'm kind of worried about it."

"He can have the Dursleys," Sirius muttered.

Harry shot him a glare. "If they tell him that I'm dead and gone, he'll think they're lying, and he'll torture them for information they don't have. If they know that I'm alive, and they can tell him that they don't know anything about me and that I don't give a shit about them, he

might believe that and kill them mercifully. Then again, maybe they'll be smart enough to go somewhere Voldemort can't find them—if they know that they're supposed to. Whatever they decide, they need to know there's a decision to make. They need to know that I'm here. Because Dumbledore told them you killed me.”

Sirius wrinkled his nose. “I guess he did.” He thought about the Dursleys. He'd cleaned himself up as best he could before he'd met them, but he'd still looked like a deranged killer when he dragged himself through their front door and demanded their nephew. And they'd handed him over. They were horrible people. It had taken everything he had not to beat the stuffing out of Vernon Dursley the first time; he didn't know how he'd sit through a second meeting. Maybe he could convince Remus to go talk to them, he thought fatally. Actually, maybe he could. It was so his turn. He ought to have been there for Harry before, so now he could go meet those nasty people and spare Sirius the headache.

“I think I ought to go without the disguise,” Harry was saying; he'd gone on talking while Sirius had been amusing himself thinking about a conversation between Remus and Dursley.

“Wait, what? You want to do it?”

“Well, yeah,” Harry said, and gave him that Ultimate Teenager Look that said he had to be the stupidest person alive and Harry was only wasting time talking to him out of pity. “Who else would they believe?”

Sirius once again tried to picture Remus talking to Dursley, and winced, unable to get him past the necessities of convincing the man to let him through the front door.

“Damn, you're right,” he mumbled. “When do you want to do it?”

“As soon as possible,” Harry sighed. “Like maybe today.”

“Today?!” He had meant it to come out harsh, but he sounded like a squawking chicken instead. “Why?”

“No time like the present, Sirius,” Harry chuckled.

Easy for him, he's been thinking about this for days, the little twat. "Well, give me a minute to think it through, at least," he said weakly. "I'm going with you, after all. I can already feel indigestion setting in. Merlin, no wonder you didn't want any breakfast."

Harry didn't look at him, then, and Sirius felt another pang of the worry he'd felt while watching Harry stir his eggs around.

"You want to go?" Harry asked.

"Well, you can't very well go alone," Sirius said. He'd been raising Harry all this time; stuff like this was his job. He could hardly foist it off on someone else just because it was unpleasant. Although that brought to mind the other talk he needed to have with Harry very soon, and he uneasily wondered if he could get Remus to do that one. If there was anything he might look forward to less than visiting the Dursleys, it was asking Harry if he was having sex with Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, or both.

That one could wait, he counseled himself. First things first.

"Well, let's put this aside and enjoy our day for now, shall we? We'll have to wait until evening when your uncle gets home to talk to them, anyway. Surely we can find something to distract ourselves in the meantime."

The day had a warm glow to it, despite the cold weather. Harry had gone to see Arthur Weasley and had been thanked profusely for saving his life. Harry had shrugged it off, but it did make him feel a very little bit better. He had been able to use those awful dreams to make something right, after all. Then he'd gotten into a snowball fight with the Weasley boys. Then he and Sirius had insisted on serving everyone else and prepared lunch, making Mrs. Weasley put her feet up and relax.

The warmth was rapidly dissipating, however. This was probably due to the fact that he was standing on the front porch of his aunt and uncle's house, watching Sirius knock on the door and dreading what

was going to happen in the next few minutes. He felt extremely self-conscious, standing out here in the open and looking like himself, rather than Evan Rivers. Ridding himself of the disguise had been all too easy, all he had to do was take out his contacts and put his glasses on, and look up a complicated little spell that could change hair colour for a few hours without screwing up the dye. They had done this after leaving Grimmauld Place, of course, since it wouldn't do for the Weasleys to see him this way.

His aunt Petunia opened the door with a smile on her face. Her eyes took in Sirius, and became a bit cooler, but still polite. She had no idea who he was. He did look quite different, after all.

"Good evening, Mrs. Dursley. I don't know that you remember me. Is your husband home yet, by any chance?"

This was a rhetorical question, since his car was in the drive, but it didn't matter since Aunt Petunia didn't hear it, anyway. Her eyes had fallen on Harry, and she was gaping at him. He stepped forward while she was still trying to find her words.

"Hello, Aunt Petunia," he said quietly. "May we come in? I need to speak to you."

Then Dudley was standing in the doorway behind his mother. He was still comically fat, but Harry noticed that he'd gotten nicely tall and broad through the shoulders as well. All the better to bully with, likely.

"You're dead," Dudley said bluntly. "That old bloke with the beard said so."

"He was wrong," Harry replied just as bluntly. "May we come in?" he repeated. "I think the neighbor is watching."

It was a calculated comment. Of course there were no neighbors watching, they were sensibly snug in their homes and avoiding the frosty night air. But Harry's aunt swiftly herded them in and shut the door against the alleged prying eyes.

“Vernon!” she called out, not objecting when Harry and Sirius followed her down the hall. “Vernon, it’s . . .”

“It’s what, Petunia? The evening news is on!”

“It’s my sister’s boy,” she hissed. “He’s not dead.”

“What?” Vernon grunted, and then they were all standing in the middle of the parlour staring at one another. “What are you doing alive, boy?”

“Gosh, it’s nice to see you again,” Harry spat out. “Can we all sit down, please? I’m not here for a friendly visit, I need to speak to you about something important.”

“Such as the fact that you’ve not been murdered?”

“Well, yes, actually,” Harry said, trying for a tone of polite disinterest. It was probably the best way to get through this conversation. “No doubt Dumbledore informed you that the man you allowed to take me when I was young had betrayed my parents and had every intention of killing me. He was mistaken. My godfather did not betray my parents. It was someone else, someone who has since been arrested so that my godfather has received a full pardon.”

“Lucky me,” Sirius added. He’d promised to keep quiet and let Harry do most of the talking, but he obviously couldn’t resist a few smart-arse comments. “I’m still waiting a nice compensation for the seven years I spent in prison, but I haven’t seen it yet.”

“So . . . so . . .” Vernon stammered, reasoning it out. “You didn’t kill him, obviously. What did you do with him?”

“Raised him. He’s my best friend’s son, isn’t he?”

“So then what are you doing here?”

Harry took control back. “I was getting to that. I’ve been out of the country with Sirius all this time, because we were on the run until Sirius received that pardon. We were also hiding from the man who

murdered my parents, waiting for me to get old enough to defend myself. The murderer wants me dead, too, you see. He wanted to kill me when I was an infant, but he, uh, got interrupted after he did my mother.” He flashed a look at Aunt Petunia to see if his terse summary had affected her, but she was just staring at him with her lips tight and her back perfectly straight. “I can’t hide from him much longer, and we think that he may start looking for people he can question about my whereabouts. It is possible that he could come here, trying to get information from you. I wanted to warn you. I thought you needed to know that I am alive, but you can honestly tell him, should he find you, that you don’t know where I am. You can tell him that if he wants to draw me out by harming people, you’re probably not his best choice.”

“A murderer is going to come to our house?” Dudley asked in an incongruously small and uncertain voice. “What did you do to make him want to kill you?”

“Nothing. I was an infant, as I said. He is just an evil man. His goal in life is destruction and pain, and he’s after me, which means I don’t have a lot of time and energy to spare on you lot. My best suggestion would be to move. Pack up, leave this house, go someplace else. I don’t think he would look for you very hard, but if I find out that he’s threatening you, I will get you some wizarding protection.”

“We don’t need protection from your people,” Vernon snapped. “You don’t think I can defend my own home from one man?”

“He’s not one man, Uncle Vernon,” Harry said wearily. He should have known they wouldn’t just believe him and take his advice. No, it couldn’t be so easy. “He has a whole group of people who follow him and do his bidding, and most of them wouldn’t think twice about torturing you and killing you. He is a killer, and he is ruthless. If you don’t do anything to protect yourself, then you’re just being deliberately stupid. I know you don’t like me, you’ve never made any secret of that, but for your own sakes listen to me. If he believes you could help him get to me, he’ll be on your doorstep the next minute, and he can and would kill you.”

“You actually expect us to leave our home?” Aunt Petunia spat out. “You dare to show up here after all this time and expect us to do that for you?”

“I don’t expect you to do anything for me,” Harry said, suppressing the urge to shake some sense into them. Hadn’t they been listening at all? “It’s for your own safety. Surely even you would accept advice from someone you hate if it means you’ll be alive?”

For a minute, he thought they would be that stupid. They looked very unmoved. But then Dudley spoke up.

“Couldn’t you just get some of your magic people to come stand guard here or something?”

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia began shouting protests against that course of action, saying they wouldn’t have freaks in their neighborhood like that. Dudley, ever slow on the uptake, seemed to have gotten the concept much quicker than they had.

“But . . . if we don’t want to move, we have to do something. I don’t want to die.”

“We won’t die, Diddy darling,” Aunt Petunia said, talking to him as though he were still five years old. Harry nearly choked.

But Dudley was looking at Harry. “You really think you’re so important that he’d kill us to find you?”

“I don’t think I’m important at all,” Harry muttered, embarrassed but refusing to break eye contact first. “But yes, that is how badly he wants me. Besides, he doesn’t need your connection to me to justify killing. He’d probably kill you even if you didn’t know me.”

“We should move,” Dudley said, looking back and forth between his parents pleadingly. “I don’t want to get killed.”

“We’ll discuss it,” Vernon grunted.

Harry could tell he simply wasn't taking this seriously enough. He held out his arm, the one usually encased in school uniform robes, and showed them the fat scar that ran almost the whole length from wrist to elbow.

"He did this to me a few months ago," he said, which was almost a criminal simplification of the story but needed to be done. "I only lived because I surprised him. You, he won't play with before he kills. If you don't have what he wants, he'll kill you between one breath and the next."

Their eyes were transfixed on the scar. Harry tapped gently at the one on his forehead. "He gave me this one, too, you know. When I was a year old. Right after he walked into my house and murdered my parents." He looked at Aunt Petunia again, even though Uncle Vernon was the one who stared at his arm with a truly thoughtful look. "My mum was found right in front of my cradle. She'd been trying to protect me."

"Enough," Aunt Petunia said. He'd never heard her voice sound so harsh, nor seen her eyes look so deep and mysterious. "That is enough. You need to leave, so we can talk about what we'll do."

Harry, seeing her strong reaction to the comment about his mother, felt bad about it. He shouldn't have said it, but he was desperately afraid that they wouldn't listen to him unless he really shocked them. He didn't want anyone getting hurt or killed simply for knowing him, not even the Dursleys.

"I am sorry, you know," he said quietly. Now he was having a hard time meeting anyone's eyes, and he was just trying to pretend Sirius wasn't sitting there looking at him with surprise. "I wish this stupid thing could stay between Voldemort and I. I wish no one else had to get hurt. But I'm going to do whatever I can to protect you. If you decide to move, send me a message to tell me where you are, so that I can warn you again if I hear anything."

"Why would you protect us?" Dudley asked in disbelief. "You don't even live here anymore."

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Dudley, who had held up admirably under the whole conversation and hadn’t revealed what a blundering idiot he really was, now was stumped. “Oh.”

Vernon was looking at him with narrow, cold eyes, but Aunt Petunia wasn’t looking at him at all.

“My mother would have wanted me to do this,” Harry said softly.

Then he stood up. Sirius quickly followed suit, obviously eager to get out of there. Just because he’d agreed to let Harry speak his piece and volunteered to go with him, didn’t mean he liked it.

“Here’s an address where you can send me information on your new location, if you decide to do that.”

It was for Muggle post, but Dumbledore had long ago seen the value of having the ability to receive Muggle post and had agreed to let Harry use the address for this when he’d called him that morning to tell him what he planned to do with the Dursleys.

He and Sirius turned for the door, and the Dursleys watched them go without a word. That, above the obvious lack of trust and the callous disregard for the fact that someone was out to get him, was what finally hurt Harry. They might never see him again, and he was walking out their door with the weight of the world on his shoulders, but they had nothing to say. They were the only blood relations he had, and they honestly didn’t care. Sirius walked beside him, still quiet, still letting him be the one in control of the situation, and Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever loved Sirius quite so much as he did then. His godfather had always been there for him, and that made it easier to ignore the way the Dursleys, for the second time in his life, let him walk away.

Christmas should have been nice, Sirius thought. He’d done what he could to make it so. Giving gifts was great, and Arthur was looking to be released from the hospital in no more than a day or two. Harry gave him and Remus awesome gag gifts, joke items that actually

rivalled Zonko's, and Sirius found out that the Weasley twins had invented them. Sirius asked them about it, and it turned out that they had a whole range of products and ideas for more, but they didn't have the capital to get a business started. It was very impressive, for a couple of seventh-year pranksters. Then Harry opened a mysteriously unlabelled package and was forced to explain that he and Hermione had swapped gifts right before leaving school, promising to wait to open them on Christmas day. It turned out that they had gotten one another the same book.

It should have been great, Sirius thought, but it wasn't. Harry looked horrible. He was pale and withdrawn, and there were circles under his eyes. Sirius worried for a few moments that he'd been having more dreams without telling anyone, but reasoned that Harry would never be that stupid. He hadn't given anyone an honest smile in days, maybe not in the entire ten days since Arthur had been attacked. He hadn't been eating well, either, and he looked thin. He didn't even ask where his gift from Sirius was, seeming not to have noticed that he hadn't gotten one yet.

The Weasleys seemed to have noticed—they got big, happy smiles on their faces when Sirius stood up and announced that he needed Harry in the study, maybe guessing that Sirius wanted to give Harry his Christmas gift in private. Which was true, of course, but he planned to ask Harry what in the name of Merlin was wrong with him, while he had him alone.

"Coming, Moony?" he said to Remus. It was a gift from both of them.

They sat Harry down and put the package in his lap, and he just looked at it for a minute.

"Should I be afraid?" he cracked.

"We've been working on this ever since summer," Remus explained.

"It took a long time to track down all the old crowd and get it put together," Sirius added. "But anyway, Happy Christmas."

Harry finally opened it, and Sirius held his breath. He'd been anticipating this ever since that night after the Order meeting, when they'd been talking about the family they'd lost. Harry opened the leather cover and froze in surprise.

James and Lily were about eighteen in the picture and completely intertwined until they were almost one body with extra limbs. They weren't kissing, but they were looking at one another and grinning like fools. All of the best pictures, the ones of James and Lily sleeping together on the floor and James with his hands on Lily's pregnant belly and a look of complete shock on his face, those ones had come from Sirius and Remus themselves. There were others that they'd scrounged up from talking to the old crowd, a few of all of them when they were students, and a few when they were at some of the larger gatherings, even a couple of wedding photos. As best man, Sirius hadn't been taking pictures that day, so he was glad someone had been. There were, of course, a plethora of pictures available from when Harry was a baby. Everyone had wanted a picture of him, so there were lots to choose from—his personal favourite was one he'd taken, of James holding Harry against his chest, both of them asleep and James' glasses falling off.

There were a couple of pictures that Sirius hadn't been certain he wanted to put in there, but in the end he'd decided to do it. A picture of himself and James when they were only fourteen, flying on their brooms—with Regulus, all of them laughing and passing a Quaffle around. A picture that they'd gotten from an old friend of Lily's, of Lily at age thirteen, sitting by the lake at school—beside Severus Snape, leaning her head on his shoulder. Sirius had gotten in a real argument with himself over that, an argument only broken up when Remus had commented mildly that if he was going to put Regulus in there, Severus shouldn't be so hard.

When Harry got to those pictures, he looked up with the question in his eyes. He didn't even have to say it out loud.

"I thought you should see them as they were. All of us, how we used to be. So you'd know . . . that it can happen. Sometimes. Maybe it doesn't work out. But I still remember that day with my brother and I miss that, and if you could ask Snape without getting your head bitten

off, I think he'd tell you that sitting there with Lily was one of the happiest days of his life. I just wanted you to see that you're more like your parents than you know."

Harry was breathing oddly, and Sirius knew that he was close to crying, but was holding it off. He didn't know why, maybe he just didn't want to cry in front of Remus, but he wasn't going to wait for Harry to cry to comfort him.

"Com'ere," he said, gesturing for Harry to stand up so he could hug him. He knew he was close to tears, himself, and resigned himself to getting ribbed about turning into a weepy old man. "What do you think, anyway? Do you like it?"

Harry just nodded, his fingers digging into Sirius too tightly, not that Sirius was going to complain. This was the closest he'd been to Harry in a week. He'd take it how he could get it. He wasn't ready for Harry to grow up enough that he didn't need this anymore, and he certainly wasn't about to let Harry start pulling away before Harry was ready just because of Voldemort. He'd had enough of letting Voldemort separate him from his family for one lifetime.

The day after Christmas, Arthur was released from St. Mungo's with a clean bill of health, and the Weasley family cleared out that evening. They wanted to get back to their home at the Burrow and have some time as a family, after their scare. The next day, as Sirius watched Harry drink a cup of coffee and read the paper without even pretending to eat, he was determined to put a stop to it. Harry had been Flooing back to the school every morning because it was the only place he knew of where he could run, and this morning Sirius thought he looked entirely too pale and sweaty for his usual exercise. His cheeks had gone hollow there were dirty great circles of exhaustion under his eyes. He was wearing his glasses, now that the Weasleys were gone, saying he needed a break from the contacts. Having been warned that tiredness or insufficient water intake would make the contacts feel dry and uncomfortable, Sirius knew why Harry needed the break.

Harry asked permission to do something he hadn't done in a long time: to go out for a few hours as an owl. He'd been up in the air

plenty on a broom, but he was missing his other method of flight. Sirius felt that it was just another way for Harry to be alone, but he agreed. And while Harry was out, he made a call.

Severus arrived at Grimmauld Place with a feeling of distinct discomfort. He'd been here before, of course, but never without the rest of the Order. He was not in the habit of making social calls, least of all calls upon people he detested. Having spent Christmas alone for years, he had never entertained the idea that he would be visiting with, of all people, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin during the season.

But he was here, nevertheless. Not to make a social call, exactly, but it still made him feel ruffled. He was here, according to Black, to give Potter some kind of emergency intervention-style Occlumency lesson. Trust Potter to think that this isolated incident with Arthur Weasley was going to turn him into a murderous villain in a matter of weeks. He was already impatient before he even set foot in the house.

But he was surprised when Black didn't say anything snide upon seeing him. In fact, he said, "Thank you for coming. Really. I don't feel right about trying to tell him that things will be fine. I'm hoping you can tell him whether or not he has a reason to be worried."

"You said as much when you called, Black," he said stiffly. He managed, with great effort, not to say, "Of course he has a reason to be worried, you utter imbecile. The Dark Lord wants to kill him."

"I told him you were coming. He's not thrilled, but he's waiting in the study."

Black left him at the door, and Severus strode in, ready to berate Potter until he gave up being a moody teenager. But he stopped when he saw the boy and stared at him.

While Sirius had watched a gradual progression for two weeks, Severus had not seen Harry since a day or two before the end of the term. Several hours of daily exercise, coupled with little food and little sleep, had wasted him. He was gaunt, with his blond hair hanging limply, and his face mostly taken up with the great bruised pits of exhaustion around his eyes.

Severus still thought Potter was an idiot to be letting it get to him like this, but seeing this, he couldn't give him a brusque assurance of that and leave. He had to do something, or their prophesied savior would end up in the hospital. His first thought was tying Potter to a chair and feeding him something very high in calories and laced with Dreamless Sleep, but Black had decided that forcing potions into the boy was not the best way to go about it and he'd extracted a promise that Severus wouldn't do it either. Pity, that. So much easier than actually talking to him.

"Hello," Potter muttered. Severus wanted to snap back that he wasn't going to take attitude from a fifteen-year-old boy when he'd come here to help, but he stopped himself. Potter didn't have an attitude, exactly. He was just too tired to manage anything more polite.

"What have you done to yourself?" he returned. "Black told me you hadn't been sleeping well, but this is pathetic."

"Sorry to disappoint. Again."

"You cannot be so foolish as to think that this behaviour is necessary. What will it take to assure you that you are not going to leap out of your bed and begin murdering the other occupants of the house?"

Harry frowned at the floor. "Why on earth would I be worried about that? Voldemort doesn't even know he could try to do that to me."

"Then what in Merlin's name is wrong with you?"

"Do you have any idea what it was like? To be stuck inside that damned snake, to be attacking Mr. Weasley like that? I could still taste the blood in my mouth when I woke up. I'm not going to listen to Sirius tell me things will be fine, because I know better. Something like that could happen again. And I do not want to be stuck inside that snake's head when they try again. I do not ever want to be dreaming that I'm enjoying how it feels to bite into Remus." He finally looked up at Severus, and his eyes were green pools of fear. "I can't go to sleep, when I don't know where my mind will drift off to."

There was some sarcastic reply on the tip of Severus' tongue, of course there was, there always was. But he had seen Lily's eyes look frightened and pained like that before, and seeing it again halted the words on his tongue and he couldn't speak them. Potter was a spoiled child with stupid ideas, but for a moment, he was Lily.

"I'll stop fighting you, sir," the boy said quietly. "I will let you do whatever you have to do in my head, if you can figure out a way to stop me from having these dreams anymore. I don't even care if you ridicule my memories anymore. Just . . . I have to learn how to stop this. Please."

He sat down. "Fine. Let us begin, then. I will go in deep so that I can see what associations you use to construct barriers. Do not try to keep me out this time."

An hour later, Harry sat limply in the armchair, sweating and shaky. In truth, Professor Snape didn't look that much better. There had been much more back and forth this time, some actual suggestions and instructions from Snape instead of just the usual struggle to keep a door shut to the intrusive presence. Harry had stopped trying to protect his memories, and let Snape see whatever he wanted. And the surrender had been exactly what was necessary. With a better understanding of how Harry's mind worked, he had much better suggestions on how to Occlude, things that actually made sense to Harry.

Because it had been so much more relaxed, Harry had accidentally gotten a few images from Snape. He hadn't been trying to. He'd just been curious because of the way Snape had been looking at him when they got started, and since he wasn't busy trying to fight him, he'd just sort of slipped in. He hadn't seen much, honestly. Well, he'd seen that Snape's father had been an abusive jerk, and he'd seen his own mother. But not much, really.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, having to try to remember how to make his voice work. "I didn't mean to."

"I am aware of that, Potter. I do not wish to discuss it."

It hardly seemed fair. Snape had gotten to see the way the Dursleys had treated him, and he'd seen that conversation he'd had with Buster where he'd actually used Legilimency on him, and he'd seen Sascha making Harry drink poison so he'd know what it tasted like. Because of the nature of his venture into Harry's mind, they'd spent most of the time on his training in Japan and his lessons with Miguel, the latter of which made Harry very uncomfortable. He'd tried to keep his memories of Catalina to the bare minimum. Just because he had a problem with Voldemort didn't mean he had to hand Snape the tools to make Sirius' life miserable.

His mind was mostly taken up with what he'd seen in Snape's mind. The way she'd smiled at him and called him Sev . . .

"I think she loved you," he said. "Like, really loved you. Did you know that?"

Snape stood up. "I have no desire to discuss it with you, Potter, as I said. I trust that you feel more certain of your abilities now?"

Harry nodded. His entire body felt like it was made of cooked noodles, floppy and useless. "Yes, sir. I feel like I can block that if it happens again. Thank you."

"You are not an expert yet by any means, Potter," Snape said sharply.

Harry fought not to roll his eyes. That, he knew. "I didn't think I was, sir. Will we be continuing our lessons, just to make sure?"

"That is up to the headmaster," Snape answered, and then he left.

Well, he shouldn't have expected much more civility. Snape, unlike Harry, hadn't given permission to have anyone poking around in his head. But he had undoubtedly made a difference this time. Harry was telling the truth, he thought he could fight his way out of a dream next time. He wouldn't have to go through that god-awful feeling of wanting to hurt someone.

He slipped into sleep without noticing how his eyes kept sliding closed. He was too deeply asleep to even notice when Sirius picked

him up and carried him to bed and told Remus not to disturb him until morning.

Chapter Sixteen

The rest of the holidays were one of the best times in Harry's life. They got a terse note from the Dursleys saying that they would be moving after the first of the year and they never wanted to hear from Harry again. The Order had one meeting, but it was quiet. Even Death Eaters had families, it seemed. It was just him and Sirius and Remus, spending their time talking and joking and reading and sparring in the practice room. Remus was still a beginner, but he had lean muscles built up over all the years of being a werewolf. He didn't tire easily, and he agreed it was a great way to work off stress, so he was learning fast. They ate and slept and didn't worry, and Harry could not think of anything he could ask for that would be better than this—for just a few days, they didn't worry about anything.

They even went to the school on the full moon. It was almost emptied of students and no one was going to be roaming the Forbidden Forest, anyway. So they Apparated into the forest and Harry finally revealed his secret to another person, transforming into his owl form while Remus weakly scolded Sirius for making Harry just like him. Then they spent the whole night as animals. Padfoot and Moony wrestled and bit and ran, while Harry flew overhead and swooped down to try surprise attacks. The next day, they joked about coming up with a nickname for Harry's owl. Being a majestic and slightly eerie bird had its benefits, Harry thought as he watched the two men struggle.

"What about Archimedes?" Harry suggested after a while.

"What?"

"You know, the great Merlin's owl, the reason we have owl post to this very day? I could live with Archimedes. I could not live with Tufty."

"Why not?" Sirius teased, mussing up Harry's hair (not that it needed any help but he never seemed to be able to stop himself). "Your owl's little ear things are just as messy as this."

Harry frowned at him.

“Archimedes might be a little bit obvious,” Remus threw in.

“It’s still better than Tufty,” he muttered, knowing Remus was right.

“I will go along with it if I get to call you Archie,” Sirius grinned.

Harry scowled at him, and pointedly refused to play along with the nickname thing at all if Sirius tried that.

When Harry went up to his room to read the book Hermione had given him, Remus was beginning to get withdrawn and strange as the moon began to rise, but he still managed to join Sirius in wishing dear Archie sweet dreams. Harry scowled at them, but he was laughing when he flopped down on his bed to read.

It was with regret that Harry decided to leave the photo album in London when he returned to school. He’d spent at least a minute or two with his Christmas gift every day, and he never got tired of seeing the evidence of the happiness they’d all shared back then. Happiness in the midst of war.

In truth, Harry thought he was probably creative enough to invent something about James and Lily, explaining the couple as someone else, dear to him and his father, so that he could have a reason to keep the album at school. But he really didn’t think he was clever enough to explain the pictures of the fondly remembered Professor Lupin without the truth becoming obvious. So before he stepped through the Floo into Sirius’ school office, with Sirius coming right behind him, he handed the album over to Remus.

“Thanks again, both of you.” He sighed. “I know it’s the smart thing to do, but I don’t want to leave it here.”

Remus just smiled, and tugged it gently away. “It’ll be here waiting for you.”

Harry made sure he gave Sirius a playful shove to the shoulder as he stepped past him into the fireplace. He didn't want Sirius to think that album was replacing him. It was wonderful to see more of who his parents were, but Sirius had made them real to him a long time ago, and nothing could replace his godfather. Not even the other man he was coming to consider a second godfather of sorts—whom he also shoved, just for fun, just at the place the bruising began on Remus' back (which had been justified retaliation for the nearly broken nose he'd given Harry).

Harry turned back to the fireplace in the study, one hand clutching at some Floo powder and with Sirius waiting at his back. There were so many things on the other side, so many things that he'd rather fly away from than return to. Umbridge waited over there. And Ginny would be there, and Draco would be there, and Snape would be there, and all kinds of worries and fears and wearying plans and plots and some plain old-fashioned schemes . . . He didn't have to go back. He knew that when it came down to it, he could make the choice. He could turn away. He could even turn into an owl and fly all the way to Spain, or anywhere he wanted. He had a choice.

A vision came to him. It wasn't anything magical, and Voldemort wasn't sending it, but Harry's own imagination provided him with the scene. He was lying on a beach next to a sun-browned woman with perfect breasts, and he didn't have a care in the world. And thousands of miles distant, a snake-faced bastard was standing over a body on the ground, holding out his wand and laughing while they screamed, asking "Where is he, Miss Granger? Where is Potter, you Mudblood freak?" He felt short of breath, and it wasn't until Sirius put a hand on his shoulder that he realised he was just standing there. He sighed, calming himself. Such a scenario wouldn't happen, especially when one took into account that no one at the school knew anything about him, outside of the teachers. Harry felt much better after he let his imagination replace the body of his friend on the ground with Dolores Umbridge. It wasn't viciousness, really. It was just a way of reminding himself that just because they were his worst fears didn't necessarily mean they were going to happen.

Calm now, Harry brushed off his godfather's hand and stepped through the fire.

He parted ways with Sirius quickly on the other side, exiting his office with a cheerful farewell. He knew that Sirius understood his hesitation before coming through, and he didn't want to talk about it. He wanted to get to his common room, where all the arriving students would be gathering to exchange holiday stories, so he could greet his friends. He wasn't close to many of them, but he was looking forward to seeing his own roommates and greeting Lavender and Parvati. Colin's camera might be annoying, but it would be good to see Colin. Perhaps he would even exchange a civil word with Ginny to get the term off on the right foot. He was friends with Gryffindor House. He'd struggled the first few weeks, but he was one of them now, subject to as much teasing as he dished out.

It was strange to think that he might have discovered his place in the world, but he rather thought he had. It was concerning, because Voldemort would do everything he could to take it away from Harry, but it moved something deep inside him to realise that this was worth fighting for. He had to fight Voldemort because this was what he wanted. England in general, Hogwarts in particular, the people he was coming to care about most of all. Molly Weasley, Remus Lupin, Professor McGonagall, Peeves the Poltergeist and Quidditch Leagues and the Auror Department and Diagon Alley and Gilderoy Lockhart's newest book—it was all his now, the good and the bad. He wanted it, and he wouldn't let it be taken away from him. It made him feel angry and afraid that someone would threaten it . . . and that was a good feeling.

When he came into the Gryffindor common room, there were cries of greeting from Angelina, Alicia, and Katie, who were all sitting together at a table, catching up on things. Lee Jordan was there, too, and they spent a few minutes happily discussing the remaining Quidditch season and how they were going to crush everyone and get the Cup this year. They'd had this conversation before, many times, but it never really got old. Still, Harry was restless. He didn't know why, but he could feel the tension in his body and mind that told him he was worried. It would help if he knew why he was worried, but he didn't, so he ignored it and laughed at Angelina's tale of her drunken uncle's antics at Christmas dinner. Lee Jordan had a better one—his drunken antics at a New Year's party—and then Harry was forced to admit

he'd had the quietest holiday of them all. There was no point keeping it a secret that the Weasleys had been there for the holidays (Angelina and Lee knew already) but as they'd been worried about their father, the whole thing had been very subdued.

Harry moved off to say hello to Seamus and Dean, and they fell into a comparison of Christmas gifts, but he still hadn't shaken his worried feeling. He finally decided that he was only feeling tense because eventually Umbridge would show up to ruin his good mood, and he went on ignoring it. Dean had apparently spent half the break playing football with his mates from back home, while Seamus had spent most of it on his grandfather's farm getting bored out of his mind and stuffing himself to death on his mother's cooking.

Harry's stomach growled.

"Ah, speaking of cooking . . ." he said, "please tell me there's dinner in the Great Hall. I forgot to eat breakfast."

"Oh, let's go, I'm wastin' away," Seamus said eagerly.

Dean raised an eyebrow and looked amused. "Wasn't it you just now telling us how you ate until you were like to explode?"

Seamus shrugged. "That was yesterday. Come on."

They trooped downstairs, intent on food. They fell to eagerly, and then the Weasleys arrived. Harry jumped up and went to them as they came in. The twins asked him if his dad had used any of their products on him yet, and Harry admitted that he'd nearly choked to death just yesterday afternoon when a Ton-Tongue Toffee had been slipped into his meal. They were entirely too pleased about that.

"How's your dad?" he asked Ron quietly as they walked back to where he had left Seamus and Dean.

"He's fine, back to work and everything," Ron said. But he frowned.

"What?"

“He says he’s ready to get back to work for the Order. He thinks it’s too important to take it easy.”

“I think he’s right.”

Ron scowled. “If it’s so important, why aren’t we involved? Why just him and Mum? If it’s too important for him to let himself heal first, then the rest of us ought to be helping.”

Harry shrugged. “I expect he’s worried about you going up against Voldemort’s people. They’re fully trained wizards with experience in Dark Arts. We’re kids who aren’t even getting good Defense lessons. If my dad had his way, we’d all be ready to fight by the end of the year. He knows better than to think we’re all safe as lambs so long as we’re underage.”

“He must be training you, then,” Ron said softly, wide-eyed. “Isn’t he?”

“He has done,” Harry said. “Of course, I’ve been reading the books he selected for our class, as well.”

Ron looked jealous, but he didn’t say anything else. Harry clapped him on the back.

“I’m just glad your dad’s doing better.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Ron said, looking a little happier and he turned to the table and sat by Seamus and Dean and started gathering food.

Harry was still feeling stressed out, and more so as time went by, not less. He didn’t want his attitude to put a damper on the last day of freedom before classes started back up, so he decided to leave the Great Hall and go back to the dormitory. Maybe he’d get his broom and go for a fly. He could excuse being alone as simply being getting warmed back up for Quidditch. But he was stopped on his way out with a hand on his shoulder. He glanced down. A slim hand with long, white fingers.

"Hello, Draco. Have a nice Christmas?" he asked pleasantly, even before he'd fully turned around.

"Fine." Draco looked put out. "Since when were you and Weasley so close?"

"Our families spent part of Christmas together. Hadn't you heard his dad was injured doing some house repairs? He was in St. Mungo's, so the Weasleys were staying with my dad and I in London. I thought half the school knew, by now."

Draco looked better when he heard that, releasing the tight grip he had on Harry. "So it's just been since the holidays."

A sick feeling stirred in Harry's gut. Draco was put out because he thought he'd missed something in keeping an eye on everything Harry was doing. Harry had known for a while now that Lucius Malfoy was a shady character and that he'd claimed to have worked for Voldemort under an Imperius curse, but now . . . now he was starting to really wonder about it. Maybe Malfoy Senior was a Death Eater, was getting orders from Voldemort right now. Maybe he knew that Harry Potter was almost certainly hiding at Hogwarts, and maybe he'd told Draco, and maybe Draco knew exactly who Harry was . . . But if that was the case, why wouldn't he have said anything by now? Even if he'd been told not to bandy it about the school, Harry didn't think Draco would have been able to keep his mouth shut around Harry, personally. He was too condescending not to have dropped snide hints all over the place.

No, Draco didn't know who he truly was. And maybe Lucius wasn't even a Death Eater. But Draco was hardly hiding the fact that he was keeping tabs on Harry rather than being friends with him, and the time was fast approaching when Harry would have to deal with that.

"Oh, don't be jealous, Draco, it's not becoming," Harry quipped, slapping Draco's back in the same way he had Ron. Of course, while Ron had hardly noticed, Draco looked distinctly perturbed by it. Or maybe he was just perturbed by Harry in general. "I'm perfectly capable of having several friends at a time."

“Why do you even insist on calling me your friend?” Draco asked sourly, his jaw tight. He had his arms crossed over his chest. “What do we even do that constitutes friendship?”

“Well, I’ll admit we were a lot friendlier at the beginning of the term, but I haven’t given up on you yet,” Harry said cheerfully. “Even if you are a Slytherin. But good point, we’ve hardly talked to each other outside of class in a while. I was about to go flying, why don’t you come along?”

Draco was so surprised by this that he forgot to be snide. He dropped his arms down to his side and just said, “What, you mean, really?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, really. Come on.”

Too stunned to argue, Draco followed him. But at the door, Harry stopped. Hermione was walking in, so recently arrived as to still be in the process of removing her gloves and taking off a knitted cap. And suddenly, the tension and worry he’d been feeling melted away. She was standing there with rosy cheeks and her hair a mess, not writhing and screaming under Voldemort’s wand. Harry hadn’t even considered that his fear was due to that little bout of overactive imagination while standing in the study at Grimmauld Place. But he suddenly felt much, much better.

“I guess we’ll need to split up to grab our brooms and coats,” Harry said. “I’ll meet you out on the pitch in about fifteen minutes, okay?”

Draco was not fooled. “Miss High-and-Mighty, Evan?” he asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

Harry scowled. “Number one, I told you not to call her that. Number two, she’s my mate, same as you, and I can talk to her if I choose. Number three, if we plan to fly, we need brooms, so I’m not just making excuses. Are you going to meet me outside or not?”

Draco looked to be on the verge of saying no, but the prospect of challenging Evan again after their Quidditch match was too good to pass up—as was the opportunity to ask invasive questions and make sure he knew everything there was to know about him, Harry

suspected. It suddenly amused him that Draco was just as much in the dark about Evan Rivers as anyone else, what with how hard he was trying.

“Fine, I’ll see you,” Draco grated out, anything but happy about it.

Harry rushed over to his friend. “Miss Hermione, there you are!” he cried out. “I was beginning to think you’d decided the cosy cabin was better than this place.”

Hermione just laughed, tucking her gloves and hat into her coat pockets. “It very nearly is, but it doesn’t have a library,” she answered, grinning at him. Harry loved it when she did that, because he knew that she hated her teeth and that she wouldn’t smile like that if she didn’t feel comfortable around him.

“At least you had one book to read,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Oh, yes,” she giggled. “And I suppose you had something to keep you company besides your dad and his friend.”

Harry laughed. “I started reading it, but I only got about halfway,” he admitted.

“You’re slacking off, Evan. Well, tell me when you finish it. I have so much I want to talk to you about.”

“I will. I hope you had a nice holiday.”

“It was good to get away,” she said softly. “I had a lot of thinking to do. I need to talk to you about some things.”

Harry felt a deep jolt in his stomach, but he just smiled and nodded. “Let’s talk later, after we’re settled back in. I’m on my way to go out flying for a while with Draco.”

She frowned at that. “I don’t know why you insist on being friends with him.”

He gave her a sober look. "It's better having him at my side where I can see him than worried he's about to stab me in the back."

She took a deep breath, and nodded. "Well, then, good luck. I'll talk to you later."

He couldn't resist giving her a quick, one-armed hug, and hoping it didn't startle her too badly. "It's good to see you, Hermione."

"You, too, Evan."

Harry headed up to the tower to fortify himself against the weather, gearing up his mind for an hour of intense exercise, both physical and mental. Say one thing for maintaining a friendship with Draco, say it honed your wits.

They met out on the pitch. Harry wore black gloves and scarf, but Draco seemed determined to wind him up again, like he had been a few months ago. He was wearing his house colours wherever possible—coat, gloves, hat, even shoes. He was also clutching the Meteor Strike, the newest and fastest racing broom in the world, which was still only available in Italy from the original manufacturer.

"Like it?" Draco nearly purred. "My father had it imported for one of my Christmas gifts."

"It's very nice," Harry said. "But it's not going to help you beat me, you know. Superior skill will trump a superior broom every time."

He could see that Draco wanted howl in outrage and start beating on him with the new broom, but instead he went for a lower blow.

"I suppose Little Miss High-and-Mighty said that? It's too bad that brooms are the one thing she's never studied, then . . ."

"Honestly, Draco! Why do you even call her that?" Harry exploded.

Draco just about snarled at him. "It's what she is. She's gone around for five years acting like she's smarter and better than all of us, and never stooping low enough to make any friends despite the fact that

she's a Mudblood who ought to be licking our boots asking for the favour of our attention. Then she goes and whores herself out for that Krum just because he's foreign. She's never been interested in putting out for anyone at this school, but she lets him paw her, then she turns around and accuses him of beating her up! It's bad enough that she sided with him over us in the Tournament, then she tries to get him in trouble when she was just too embarrassed to admit what a slut she is. She says that he beat her that night Diggory won the Tournament, but I think she was doing something a little more enjoyable."

Harry stepped over to Draco and grabbed him roughly by the collar. Draco's eyes went wide with fear and he tried to back away, but Harry had him and wasn't letting go. He stared Draco down, and he noticed only vaguely that his hands were white-knuckled and shaking with anger.

"I can see that you don't understand her in the least, so I'll enlighten you. She never made friends because she was too shy. She is smarter than all of us, so just get used to that. As for Viktor Krum, he was a bully and a coward for what he did to her, no matter what it actually was. And you know what? Even if you don't understand that, you still don't have the right. Because I don't care if she was conceited. I don't care how many pegs you think she needed to be taken down. I don't even care if she paraded through the Great Hall naked waving a bottle of caramel sauce and saying 'Come and get it.' She was fourteen years old and there was nothing she could have done to deserve what Krum did. A real man would have never, ever, hurt her or taken advantage of her."

Draco was very still in his grip. "And you're a real man, are you, Evan?" he whispered.

Harry finally let him go, nearly threw Draco away from him. "I'm working on it. Now come on, let's just fly."

When Harry returned to the common room, he found Hermione curled up in a chair with Neville sitting by her. They appeared to be just chatting, and Harry was puzzled. He hadn't known they were friends. He approached and could hear that they were discussing Voldemort.

Well, that made more sense, if you were going to talk Voldemort, Neville was the guy to do it with.

“Hey,” he said in greeting, sinking down onto the floor in front of Hermione’s chair. “I’m stunned that you two aren’t both off in corners studying,” he teased.

Hermione made a face at him. “I do have friends besides you,” she said archly.

“Of course you do,” Harry said. “They’re called books.”

“Oh, you,” she muttered, giving him a shove with her foot.

Neville, as usual, missed the humourous part. “Hermione and I have been friends for a long time,” he said. “Ever since second year when she helped me get out from under that diary.”

Harry had heard about this from Dumbledore, but Evan Rivers certainly wouldn’t have, so it would look weird to Hermione if he acted like he understood. “What diary?”

Of course, Neville was thinking of Hermione, as well. It was nice to have someone else at this school who was thinking strategically. He knew better than to explain the whole thing, about how the diary had to be destroyed with basilisk venom and how it had belonged to Voldemort. But he did explain that it was part of the legend of the Heir of Slytherin and the Chamber of Secrets had contained a basilisk. He seemed embarrassed by it.

“I’m so glad we caught it in time, Neville,” Hermione said. “I was so worried about you back then.” She frowned. “I know we’ve both had our own problems recently, but it shouldn’t have taken this long for us to start talking again.”

Neville agreed, but he was uncomfortable. Harry rescued him.

“Hermione, did you still need to talk to me?”

"Oh, yes, I did," she said, waiting for him to get out of the way so she could stand up. "Sorry, Neville, we'll be back in a while."

"That's okay," he said, but he locked eyes with Harry and gave him a stern look. It was a warning. He shouldn't get too close to Hermione and get her hurt. Harry concurred with Neville, so the warning wasn't strictly necessary.

"Should we go for a walk?" he asked politely.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't want anyone to overhear us."

"Up to my room, then?" he asked, flicking his eyes over to the boys who shared the room with him. They were deeply engrossed in a card game and wouldn't be interrupting any time soon. Hermione followed him without argument. Harry reflected that she must really trust him to do so. After all, the last time she'd agreed to go somewhere alone with a boy, he'd put her in the hospital.

Harry cast a charm on the door and around them to be sure they wouldn't be heard. "Hermione, you've got me worried. What is it?"

Hermione looked down for a moment, collecting herself, then met his eyes. "It's a lot of things. You-Know-Who, and the thing your father is a part of, and the fact that the Ministry is keeping everyone in the dark. I don't like the way they're treating this. I don't like the way they deny what's right in front of them. But what I really don't like is not knowing."

"Not knowing what?" he asked cautiously.

"Not knowing what's going to happen!" She hugged her arms around herself. Harry wished he could hold her, if she was so in need of it, but he didn't think she'd let him, so he stayed still. "I'm afraid, Evan. I'm sure the headmaster and your father and the others in that group are doing what they can, but what can they really do? Is there a plan to stop all this?"

"You've really been thinking this through, haven't you?"

"It's more than that, though." Her voice was getting softer, but more determined somehow. "What you said to me that night in the library has had me thinking this whole time. It's kind of inspired me. You and your father only just came here, and already you're deeply involved. It's what your father said. If you're here, then it's your problem. So . . . I think what I'm trying to say is that it's my problem. I want to help. I want to do something."

"Hermione, do you know what you're—"

"Of course I know what I'm saying. I'm not asking to get sent out on dangerous missions to spy on You-Know-Who or anything. I know I haven't got the training for that, and that I'm too young. But I want to know about it all. I want you to tell me about anything you hear from your dad. If there's anything that their group needs, if they need someone to look up spells for them, I could help with that. I'm not trained how to fight, but I could do something. I need to do something. This is my home and my world and I'm just as responsible for defending it as anyone else."

"Hermione, if you start actively going against him—"

"Oh, Evan, don't treat me like I'm stupid. I've studied this. I know better than to think neutrality means protection. You-Know-Who doesn't care if I'm neutral. I'm a Muggleborn. I'm in danger either way. If I'm going to be a target, I'd rather be doing something to fight him."

"Oh, Hermione . . ." he sighed, and then he couldn't help himself. He pulled her into his arms and fought back tears. "I wish you didn't think so much. I don't want to hear this. I don't. I can't imagine you getting hurt."

Hermione pushed her way out of his arms. "Oh, so I'm just a delicate little flower in need of protection, but since you're a big strong man, you can be just as involved as you like?"

"No, of course not, that's not what I meant. I just meant that I care about you. It means that I'm afraid, too."

Hermione took hold of his hand, trying to show him that she wasn't upset, just that she didn't want to be trapped in anyone's arms. "But we all have a reason to be afraid, don't we?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. You're right, he doesn't respect neutrality. I don't think he'll care that we're kids, either. If we oppose him, that makes us targets. And here we are, stuck in a school that's not allowed to teach us how to defend ourselves. My dad would be training us if he could, but he doesn't want to lose his job."

"We'll have to figure out a way. I don't think I'm the only one, Evan. I think there are others, in our house, at least, who would want to oppose him if they knew the truth. I wish Professor Dumbledore wasn't at odds with the Ministry like this! All of the students should understand what's coming, but they can't so long as the Ministry doesn't believe him and ignores the warnings."

"You really think the other students feel the way you do?"

"We could go down there and find out," she said, and suddenly she was blushing. "We need to go down there, anyway. If we stay up here in your room they'll all think . . ."

"Oh, let them think what they like," Harry said dismissively. "But maybe I should start finding out how many other students are thinking this way. Maybe I can talk to my dad and he can start giving the interested students some tips on things to practise to defend themselves."

"That would be great, Evan. Do you think he would?"

"Oh, yes, he takes this very seriously," Harry assured her. They headed down the stairs, and began to hear shouting. They hurried to get to the common room and see what the commotion was.

It was Seamus and Ron. Harry was surprised. They'd always gotten along before now.

“Just because Dumbledore says he’s back doesn’t mean he is!” Seamus was shouting. “The Ministry thinks he’s crazy, and I’m startin’ to wonder, meself!”

“You honestly think Dumbledore’s the only one saying so?” Ron was yelling back. “Don’t you read the news? Haven’t you heard about the people who’ve gone missing or turned up dead? What do you think happened to them?”

“It doesn’t have to be You-Know-Who!”

“Well, if the most powerful wizard in the country is saying it, and half the Auror squad is saying it, and half of the teachers at this school whenever Inquisitor Umbridge isn’t around, then I get the feeling that it might be true!”

Harry knew that Ron was feeling very insulted right about now. They hadn’t been able to tell anyone what had happened to Mr. Weasley, since they’d have to explain what he’d been doing patrolling the entrance to the Department of Mysteries, so it wasn’t Seamus’ fault. But he was basically denying what had happened to Arthur and discounting how close he’d come to making the ultimate sacrifice to protect this country from Voldemort. He didn’t want Ron trying to make the argument in anger, though. It wouldn’t be nearly as convincing.

“If he was back, someone would have seen him,” Seamus was fuming.

“People have seen him,” Harry interjected.

They both turned to look at him. Ron looked shocked. They were supposed to keep the Order a secret!

“Well, not him him, but they’ve seen his followers. The Daily Prophet won’t print it, but it’s been in some independent publications. The Dark Mark has been seen in the sky above a couple of homes where people have been murdered, and Aurors have reported tailing people who were working for him last time and seeing them all meeting up with one another. There’ve been reports than the Dementors of

Azkaban are getting restless, and that's a pretty bad thing when they're guarding the people who were convicted of being Death Eaters. And then there's the fact that Peter Pettigrew turned up over the summer after disappearing for fourteen years—he didn't come out of hiding for no reason, did he?"

Seamus looked contemptuous. "None of that proves it."

"Maybe not on it's own, but what the hell else could it all mean when you put it together? Just because you don't want him to be back doesn't mean he isn't."

Seamus tried to stare him down. "What makes you such an expert anyway, Rivers? You're not even from this country."

"But I'm here now, aren't I? My dad and I are making England our home, and that means that threats against it are just as much my problem as they are yours. I'm not going to sit around and allow some kind of hostile takeover."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Learn what I can," Harry said cautiously. He felt Hermione at his side, keeping quiet, but agreeing with everything he said. It warmed him. Made him feel braver about this. "Fight, if and when I can. I know we're all young here, but look at what Fred and George did when they were only thirteen," he said, nodding to the twins (who, not inclined to be embarrassed by a moment in the spotlight, gave little bows). "If you think it's not your problem, that You-Know-Who and his people will just leave you alone, then you're going to get killed that much quicker."

"But why would he go after us?" asked Parvati Patil. "What have we done? We're just students."

"I know he'll come after me," Dean spoke up glumly. "Me and Hermione and anyone Muggle-born. Maybe you lot don't have to worry about, but we do. Evan's right. We ought to be prepared."

That made everyone uncomfortable. It was a lot harder to deny you would have to be involved at all when you were standing right next to someone that Voldemort would come for. How could you say you wouldn't fight for the people you lived with every day? Maybe you didn't want to fight, maybe you didn't plan to, but you couldn't say it when you were right there beside someone who didn't really have a choice.

"Prepared how?" Seamus spoke up again. "What are we supposed to do? Even if we didn't have Umbridge keepin' this school locked down so tight we can't even think about You-Know-Who without her findin' out. . ."

"Evan, your dad's the Defense professor," Hermione said, obviously remembering what they'd been talking about in his room. But Harry was starting to get a different idea. It was a crazy idea, really, but it might just work. "Maybe he could help us."

"He'd like to," Harry said.

"Merlin, the curriculum he planned for us was all about fighting!" Ron blurted out. "No wonder the Inquisitor won't let him teach it! He was going to teach us how to go up against the Death Eaters!"

Harry nodded. "I think so."

"Well, maybe we could, I don't know, pretend to have a study group or something," Parvati suggested. "We could say we're meeting in a classroom for homework, and your dad could come and teach the classes he planned out."

Harry shook his head. "He won't be able to do that. Not with Umbridge watching him like a hawk."

"Oh, right," she said, crestfallen. "I guess that would take up too much of his time, anyway."

"Oh, believe me, he would make the time, if he could get away with it."

"I don't think he could avoid Umbridge's notice like that," Hermione said, and Harry could see in her eyes that she knew where he was leading the conversation. The look seemed to say that she approved.

"No, not my dad," Harry said slowly.

Eyes all over the room were lighting up as they started to catch on.

"But I probably could."

Chapter Seventeen

When the common room exploded, both with arguments and agreements, Harry slipped a note to Ron Weasley. Ron was already standing right beside him, and Harry had made a point of carrying around a ballpoint pen because they were so much handier in a pocket than a quill was. He was able to give it to Ron without being seen. Ron read it, and gave him a look of searching, then nodded.

Ron only allowed them all to argue over the idea of Evan Rivers leading a DADA study group for a couple of minutes before he stepped in.

"Look, we need to think about this, all of us. This might be a good idea, and it might not. It's going to call Umbridge down on our heads, did you think of that? Besides, no offense, Rivers, but you're fifteen years old, just like us. I don't know what you think you can teach us."

"Do you see somebody better to do it?" Hermione demanded, coming to his defense. Harry squeezed her hand. She looked at him with confusion, but he just fixed his jaw and looked stony, like he was upset with Ron.

"No, not necessarily. But I don't like the idea of trusting this kind of training to someone as inexperienced as he is. Like I said, no offense, Rivers."

"No, none taken," Harry bit out the words with sarcasm, but looked like he was backing down. "You know what, you're probably right. Even my dad hasn't gone up against the likes of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but he'd do a sight better than me. I'll talk to him. Maybe he'd be willing to help us out, even with Umbridge. Let's think about this, I'll talk to him, and we'll go from there."

Even the people who'd been saying just that did not look too happy when Harry just turned around and walked away after that. Hermione followed him, with a thunderous scowl.

"What was that?" she hissed under her breath.

“Just an idea.”

“I thought that with everything we’ve just been talking about—”

“I have a plan, okay? I had to do this, to protect the people who are going to be serious about it. You’ll see.”

Over the next few days, students kept coming to Harry in ones or twos, asking anxiously if he’d spoken to his father, if he’d thought about it. News had spread outside of Gryffindor about his allegedly off-hand suggestion in his common room, and people came from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff to see him. Most of the school didn’t come to him at all, but everyone who did got a deeply probing look. “Are you serious about this?” Harry would ask them. “Are you ready to learn how to survive this war?” Some of them tried to make light of it, and Harry blew them off. The ones who said “yes,” those were the ones who were told. They were given the day and time of the meeting, and told to speak of it to no one. No one at all, unless they wanted this whole thing shut down before it ever had a chance.

None of them approached him when he was with Draco Malfoy, they were smarter than that. But so was Draco. Harry saw him watching, and he knew that Draco knew something was going on. He would have to be dealt with.

It was a ragtag group of people who arrived on Saturday morning in the unused, half-abandoned classroom Harry had picked out. Thanks to having access to not only the genius Marauder’s Map, but two of the Marauders, everyone had been given instructions to simply go through the first door they came to when they got to the end of the secret tunnel behind the painting of Lars the Loud on the fifth floor. They didn’t know that they’d be coming to a classroom on the second floor, so they couldn’t have said anything to anyone.

Hermione came early with him, to make sure the room was secure.

“You have the parchment?” Harry murmured to her, just as the first people—Lee Jordan and the Weasley twins—walked through the door. “The one we talked about?”

Hermione nodded. "I'll have you know that this was a tricky bit of magic."

"You're the best, Miss Hermione," he smiled.

"You ready for this?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Have to be."

They trickled in slowly, individually or in pairs, but eventually all of the people he had spoken to this week had arrived, and Harry took that moment to lace a couple of jinxes that Sirius had taught him around the entrance to the secret tunnel, then to the door of the long-forgotten classroom. He added a Muffliato spell, directing it to the door, and hoped it would all be enough. No one could come or go or hear what he said without his knowing about it.

Finally, he turned around and met all the eyes looking at him. All of his own roommates were there, and all of the Weasleys, even Ginny, and the rest of the Quidditch team. Hermione was there, of course, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown—who'd been on either side of Ginny when Ginny had come to ask about this, no doubt cajoled into it by her. Well. There'd be no backing out after today. Also sitting by Ginny were her girlfriends from Ravenclaw, Harry's rival Seeker Cho Chang and the blond Luna "Loony" Lovegood. Hannah Abbot had brought a small contingent of Hufflepuff students, and Harry was intrigued by just how far the ripples from his small act of kindness to Liam Crew had spread. Colin Creevey was there, without his camera at Harry's insistence. It was Neville Longbottom that Harry most wondered about—he didn't exactly need training, did he?—but he'd asked and Harry figured he was there just to be a part of this. Knowing was better than not knowing, and all that.

Too few. The people closest to him in Gryffindor, and a mere handful from the other two houses. Why doesn't he just kill someone important, give us a martyr, so people understand how serious this is? He knew it was an awful thing to think, and he wished he hadn't thought it, but it was true that they needed a rallying point, and they didn't have one.

“All right,” Harry said soberly, hardly raising his voice loud enough to be heard by the group. He trusted his precautionary spells, but better safe than sorry. “You’re here for one reason: to learn. You’re here because you know that the Ministry is wrong, that their denial of the truth is going to hurt us. They brought Umbridge here to keep supposed radicals like the headmaster and my father under control, and it’s keeping us from learning how to fight. We can’t even talk about what’s happening in our society without getting in trouble, and that’s just fascist.”

“Hear, hear,” Lee Jordan said with a scowl. Harry flashed him a grateful look, and the encouragement helped him settle into his groove.

“But at this point, it’s the restrictions on the curriculum that most concern me. We need to know how to fight. I’m not suggesting that any of us are going to be ready to challenge You-Know-Who anytime soon, or even any of his followers. But if we keep going along the path the Ministry has laid out for us, we won’t be able to defend ourselves at all. You’re here because you know the other side doesn’t care how young or defenceless you are. You’re here so you don’t get killed.”

“We know why we’re here, Rivers,” Seamus said stonily. “Get on with it.”

Seamus was wrong. It had needed to be said. There were a lot of faces looking pale and scared, like they hadn’t considered the consequences.

“I just want us to be clear. If you’re not going to work hard, then you can go. If you’re here just because it’s interesting, some kind of intellectual pursuit, then leave. I’m all for intellectual pursuits, which is why I have the knowledge to teach you—”

“He’s not joking, his grades are starting to threaten mine,” Hermione said softly, but she was smiling.

“—but that’s not what this is, not to me. We’re going to learn how to protect ourselves, and our families and friends. We’re going to learn

how to hurt people. It's not something you can do halfway, so if you're not planning to give me the absolute best you have, if you're not planning to listen to what I have to tell you, then go now."

Harry paused, and held his breath. No one left. They looked very grim now. That was good, though, they were taking it seriously. Hermione nodded at him to go on.

"All right, then. Let me tell you the plan. We are going to learn everything that my dad wanted to teach us this year, plus some. He and I have made a list of the twenty most practical combat spells we could think of, and we are going to learn one every week. You will practice these spells on your own, all week, and when we meet, we will be engaging in duels with each other. If you don't take the time to learn the spells before we meet, you won't be participating in the lessons and duels that week. I'm taking this very seriously." As if he needed to reiterate that at this point. "We need to learn how to fight in combat situations."

"Just how many of us do you think are planning to be in combat situations?" a blond boy from Hannah's group asked. He looked almost amused by the whole thing.

Harry shook his head, hardly able to believe that anyone would be stupid enough to find this funny or think it wouldn't happen. "I don't care if you're planning on it. Unless you plan to stand by in this war and watch your friends die, then you will probably find yourself fighting at some point."

"War? What war?" he sneered. "I must have missed the edition of the Daily Prophet that said 'Wizarding World goes to war.'"

"Look, the Ministry has that paper in its pocket, and the Ministry has its own agenda. Fudge is scared, and he has a serious personal rivalry with Dumbledore, who's been the most outspoken about You-Know-Who returning. They don't have to admit it for it to be true. The war will still come," Harry said, and it was almost a promise. "It's coming just like it did last time, just like the headmaster has been saying. He's not an idiot, and neither am I. If I can see the signs just by reading the newspaper, then it's pretty obvious, don't you think?"

Now look around you. All of you. How many of the people you see here are Muggleborn?" He locked eyes with Hermione. "How many people that you see every day are under threat just because they were born? If the wizarding world sits by and watches it happen, then all those people will be dead. Murdered. Maybe those of you who are pureblooded don't think it's your problem. But you'd be wrong. Killers and tyrants are everybody's problem. You can stick your fingers in your ears and shut your eyes and one day when you open them again you'll find out that the world you knew has been destroyed and a murdering bastard is dictating your every move. Sound good to you? Yeah, me either."

There were a lot of angry faces. They didn't like being told all this. But sooner or later, they would all have to face the truth. Facing it sooner might mean they lived to see later.

"So, that's the plan. We learn to fight. But we tell no one outside of our group. If no one knows, they can't stop us. And we aren't going to tell the teachers, not even the ones on our side. They need to be able to deny knowing anything about this, they can't be seen to support us. We're on our own. Not even my dad is going to know."

He nodded to Hermione. It was time for her part in this.

"I'm still looking for a place for us to meet in secret, because this place isn't going to be nearly good enough. I know that we all have other things on our schedules, so I'll try to find a night when there's no Quidditch practice or club meetings. Hermione here," he gestured to her where she stood with a sheet of parchment in her hands, "has a sheet for you to sign. Put your name on it, and you will be saying that you agree to keep this secret. Once you sign, you will be bound to that secret. You don't have to come back and join this group, but you'll have to keep this quiet. Hermione assures me that if we get ratted out, we'll be able to know who did it, and they won't find it enjoyable."

"I'm not signing that," the blond Hufflepuff said.

"Fine," Harry said, drawing his wand. "I'll Obliviate you and you can go on your merry way."

“What? You’re not going to do that,” he scoffed, but Harry didn’t even crack a smile. “What is this?”

“This is war,” Harry said, staring the boy down. “It’s not a joke, and it’s not a club. You’re in or you’re out. Your choice.”

The Weasley twins were first in line, but eventually, everybody signed. Even the Hufflepuff boy signed his name. It was Zacharias Smith.

Harry removed the jinxes on the hidden tunnel back up to the fifth floor. He was taking no chances, ensuring that the students would never even know what floor they’d been on, just in case he had to use this room again. He’d checked it out and it was only around the corner from a section of the castle that they did use, but the sharp turn of the hallway muffled the noise and made it seem much more abandoned than it actually was. He was the last one up the tunnel, making sure everyone else was out first. His mood was grim and he was in no mood to talk to anyone, but he did appreciate that Hermione stuck close, hanging back until the end.

Hermione was really an invaluable friend, he knew. She’d been supportive of this whole idea, and she’d helped make sure that this plan of secrecy was airtight. She’d been prepared to help him track down anyone that he’d talked to that did not attend the meeting, but that wasn’t going to be necessary, since they’d all arrived and they’d all signed her spelled parchment. He hadn’t needed to Oblivate a soul, for which he was going to be eternally grateful. He’d had plenty of practice, but that didn’t mean he was all that keen on doing it to a live human being, a friend of his.

A few of the students were looking back at him, whispering about him. They didn’t think he had this in him. If he was being totally honest with himself, he wasn’t sure he could do it, either. But he would never say so, because to admit it would be to make it true. Not only that, but a lack of confidence in their leader was the quickest way to get a group of people killed.

It was when he was moving Lars the Loud back into position that he felt a hand on his shoulder. He knew he was overreacting even as he

did it, but he was so afraid that Draco had talked to someone, that he'd seen something, that this whole thing was going to go up in flames before it even got started . . . he freaked.

Instincts trained into him at a very young age, coupled with years of practice, took over. He placed his hands on the arm reaching for him without a thought in his head, twisting and ducking and throwing, and letting out a wordless shout. He threw his assailant onto the stone floor with their wrist snapping on the way down, making them screech.

Draco stared up at him through a fall of normally perfect blond hair, his eyes going glassy with pain and shock. He'd meant to be the one shocking Evan with his presence and his suspicions, and instead he was on the ground and his wrist was broken.

"Oh, Merlin, ow, oh bloody—"

"Hold still," Harry said grimly, getting down on his knees and drawing his wand.

Draco fumbled for his wand with his good hand, but Harry just knocked his groping hand aside.

"Hold still, I said, I'm going to heal it."

"You don't know healing spells," Draco panted, trying not to show how much it hurt.

"Yes, I do, I used to patch my dad up all the time." Harry proved it by mending the wrist quickly. Draco stared at his wrist with something like confusion, obviously too overwhelmed by what had just happened to fully realise that it was fine now.

Harry chanced a quick look around. Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville were all walking together, and they'd all seen it, as had Hannah and that Zacharias bloke and their friend Ernie. They all looked mightily impressed, although Harry wasn't sure whether it was his throw or his healing spell that had done it. Of course, that wasn't the most relevant point right now.

“Evan,” Ron said in a concerned, strained voice. “We can’t let him—”

“I’ll take care of this,” Harry said firmly, grabbing Draco’s arm and hauling him back to his feet with a glare that told him he’d better keep his mouth shut. He started dragging him in the opposite direction down the corridor. “We need to talk,” Harry said to the Slytherin boy, “or rather I’m going to talk and you’re going to listen for a minute.” He quickly found an empty room. He pushed Draco in ahead of him, shut the door, and cast the same protective spells he had on their meeting room downstairs.

“What are you doing?” Draco demanded, drawing his wand much more smoothly now that his wrist wasn’t broken.

“Oh, put it away, you idiot. I said we need to talk, not duel.”

“Fine,” Draco snapped, lowering it but not tucking it away. “About what?”

“About you. You’ve been following me around all week, and don’t think I haven’t noticed. Now you show up here. Why?”

“Because I know you’re up to something, Evan. If you’re not going to tell me what it is, then I’m reduced to finding out on my own.”

Harry sighed. He sat down. He hardly knew where to start. He’d started formulating a plan to deal with Draco, but he hadn’t truly decided yet. He’d meant to run the idea past Sirius first, maybe even Hermione. But he’d run out of time for that. He had to make a decision.

“First, let’s get everything out into the open, okay? Everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you maintain this ludicrous mockery of a friendship so that you can spy on me. You think I’m important for some reason, and you need to know everything I do. I don’t know who you report to, obviously your dad, but I don’t know who your dad reports to.”

“Leave my dad out of this.”

“I will if you will,” Harry shot back, eyes blazing. Draco backed down. “But you won’t, so I think we ought to just have it all out in the open. Why do you need to know about me so badly?”

Draco said nothing.

“Huh? Why all this stupid posing and trying to make it look like we’re friends when all we ever do is fight? What’s going on? Why do they want you to watch me?”

“I don’t know, all right?” Draco snapped, looking more embarrassed by it than angry. “I don’t know anything.”

Harry almost laughed, it was such a relief. He really didn’t know. His father had told him to follow Harry’s every move without telling him why. That was perfect! He’d made Draco upset, and Harry could use that!

“Well, I’m done with it. Okay? I think I’ve proven that I’m not so stupid I didn’t see what you were doing, and I’m not going along with it anymore.”

Draco headed for the door. “Fine.”

“I’m not done with you yet.” He made it sound ominous on purpose, but Draco didn’t react until he started raising his wand.

Draco spun around, wand out, and shouted “Expelliarmus!”

Harry blocked it, kept hold of his wand. He looked at Draco with a smile. “Yes, I thought so.”

“Thought what?”

“You have much better defensive instincts than the rest of them. I need you if I’m going to train them properly.”

“What are you talking about?”

"Here's the thing, Draco. I know what you've been doing with me, and to be perfectly honest, I've been letting you so that I can keep an eye on you, too. But that's not all. There could be something worth redeeming somewhere in there, and if any part of you is worth the effort, I'm going to find it."

It wasn't that likely, to be honest. But he kept remembering the picture. James, Sirius, and Regulus, flying together, not fighting each other. Looking at that picture knowing that Regulus would be dead only a few years later when he tried to escape the life he'd so unknowingly walked into. What Sirius had said. "It's possible." It had to be possible. It had to be possible that someone like him and someone like Draco could work together. If it wasn't possible, then how was any of this worth the cost?

"I'm starting a group to practise Defense," he said plainly. "That's what you saw. We're meeting in secret so no one can stop us, and we're going to be learning how to fight. I want you there, because you're better than they are. I suppose I have your father to thank, but it's true. You know more, and you have fighting instincts. You should be part of our group."

"Now I know you're lying, Rivers," Draco sneered, crossing his arms. "You'd have to be a complete idiot to tell me something like that when you know where the information is going to go."

Harry just smiled, albeit a bit grimly. "You're the one who keeps telling me that Gryffindors are idiots. But even I'm not that stupid. We're going to make a deal. I don't have to let you into this group, Draco, but I will. I will allow you to benefit from the lessons, teach you everything I teach the group, and hone your fighting instincts. It will make you a threat to me and my friends, and I'll allow that. So long as you promise to keep it a secret. You will be able to fight me, but you will never be able to tell your father about it. Does that sound fair?"

Draco started laughing. "You actually expect me to keep my end of the bargain?" he chuckled. "I promise not to tell, and you'll believe me?"

Harry started laughing, as well. "Merlin, no. I don't trust you as far as I could throw you, snake. You're going to make an Unbreakable Vow."

Draco stopped laughing. So did Harry. Harry just grinned, and his eyes shone with the knowledge that he had Draco up against a wall.

"But, that's, you're mad, you can't be serious," Draco was stuttering and looking at a complete loss.

"Of course I'm serious. I don't know of any other way to be sure you won't talk. We're not going to negotiate. That's the deal. You take the vow, and you can be part of my group."

"What makes you think I would say yes to something that ridiculous?"

"You'll do it," Harry said with assurance.

"Oh, will I?"

"I know you, Draco. You won't be able to resist the chance to have one up on me, your father, and everybody. You'll tell him you know nothing and feel like his superior, and you'll learn how to hex me and all the Gryffindors half to death. You'll be the only Slytherin who knows anything about it, and you'll get to keep your original goal of watching my every move. How do you not benefit from this?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I'd die if I told anyone?"

"Trust me, Draco," Harry said with complete sobriety. "If you didn't take the vow, if you put us all in danger by telling what you know . . . I'll make you wish for death. I'll make you wish you'd taken it."

Draco frowned, and rolled his wand across his palms. He was thinking about it. He was actually thinking about it. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"If you think I can benefit from it so much, why would you be extending such an invitation? The smart thing to do would be to make sure I never found out at all."

"You know what? I probably would if I could, but you surprised me today, didn't you? I can't be worried at every moment when you're going to come up and twist the knife. It's like this: if you're in front of me with a wand, I know where you are. I'd rather have the threat in my face than at my back. And trust me, I know that you are a threat to me. But I'm being completely honest with you, and that's not something I do too often. It's more than strategy. I'm still trying to be friends with you. I don't know why, and I think I'm daft, but I'm still trying."

Draco didn't seem to know what to do with all this. Harry hardly knew what he was doing, either, so it was no great surprise that Draco would be confused.

"So, are we doing this or aren't we?"

"What, you mean, now?"

"You make the vow right now, or I put a memory charm on you right now. Your choice."

"You can't do this."

Harry leveled his wand in Draco's face. "Try me, you bastard. I'd love to see you try me."

Chapter Eighteen

"My sources might know of a better location than the room we used for the first meeting, but I'm not going to ask them," Harry answered Hermione. They were alone in the common room, for once, but that was most likely due to the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning and everyone else had obeyed curfew. It was the only time they were going to be able to talk without fear of being overheard. They'd already risked it once to plan out the first meeting.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. She had her head propped up in her hands, and her elbows rested on her knees, which Harry would have thought would make nodding awkward. "Which means you asked one of the teachers for a good spot the first time." She turned to look at him, sprawled out across the sofa that she sat at the foot of, and she frowned. "Don't you think you're taking this denying culpability thing too far? The teachers know how to keep quiet."

Not under Veritaserum, they don't, Harry thought, but didn't say. He knew that's what Umbridge had been meaning to dose him with during his detention, and he'd been extremely wary of her ever since. The less information anyone had, the less they'd give when they were helpless. And Harry hardly knew who he was worried about anymore. Umbridge could ruin a lot of lives, but maybe it was Voldemort that he didn't want secrets getting back to. Anyone could be reporting to him.

"Maybe we ought to ask for help," Hermione continued, while Harry thought. "Let's think about who would know the most about the castle. Maybe the headmaster?"

Harry shot bolt upright. "Hermione, you're a genius." She opened her mouth. "No, you really are. Who knows the most about the castle?"

"Well, I just said—"

"Its servants, of course!" he declared. "We have to talk to the house elves. I'm sure they're all in bed at this hour, but we can find them tomorrow! Probably the kitchen, right?"

"Well, sure, I— what're house elves?— servants, that's brilliant—"

Harry cut off Hermione's stammering by pulling her up off the sofa. "Sorry, but I think I was shouting for a second, someone will be on their way to take points off or something. Hurry, to bed."

Hermione nodded, and scuttled up the stairs. On the landing where they had to turn to go their separate ways, she looked at him with a smile.

"You won't go to the kitchens without me?"

Harry smiled back. "Wouldn't dream of it. Smart girl like you probably knows twice as many hexes as I do."

Hermione let out a little chuckle, and then they were ducking swiftly into their rooms and trying to pretend they'd been asleep for hours.

Harry tickled the pear in the painting of fruit, and the painting swung aside obediently. Hermione gave him an admiring look.

"How'd you know, Evan?"

"Fred and George," Harry said with a shrug. "And before you ask, yes, I did ask them if they knew any good places for our first training session, and they said the room we were in was the best they'd seen. Unless, of course, I wanted to know how to sneak everyone out of the castle proper and into Hogsmeade, in which case they'd be my guys." He looked at her, waiting for her to disapprove, but she just sniffed.

"Well, we've got a Hogsmeade weekend soon anyway, not like we need to sneak out."

They went through into the kitchens, which were bustling with activity. Tiny darting figures moved between tables full of half-prepared food, surrounded by clouds of delightful smells and steam. Harry's limited experience with house elves had prepared him to meet the Hogwarts servants, but not so Hermione. She froze and stared at them. They wore uniforms, of a sort, tea towels with the Hogwarts crest.

“Um, hello there,” Harry said to the nearest elf, who was levitating a rather precariously tall stack of clean plates across the room.

“Good day, young sir,” the elf squeaked. Harry couldn’t really tell if it was a male or female elf, unfortunately. It looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione, and said, “Is you requiring a snack before class?”

“Uh, sure,” Harry said, sort of surprised, while Hermione shot him a dirty look. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Hobs,” the elf squeaked. Okay, probably a boy, then. Harry had just decided this when he was surrounded by a handful of the little elves, bearing fresh fruit, toast, tea, and all sorts of little cakes and things. Hermione was gaping.

“Listen, Hobs, thanks for all this,” Harry said, plucking a handful of grapes from a bowl held aloft, so as not to hurt anyone’s feelings. “But we actually came down here to ask you something.” He dug his elbow into Hermione’s side as gently as possible, urging her to take something. Looking overwhelmed, she lifted up a cup of steaming tea and took a careful sip. The smile she offered the elf with the tea tray was painful.

“Young sir is wishing to make special meal request?” Hobs asked, standing up straight with importance. “We house elves is knowing how to cook for many diets, sir! Vegetarian, and low-carb, and many others! We has instructions to accommodate students, sir!”

“Really? Do any of the Quidditch players ask for high-protein meals or—” Hermione’s stricken look made Harry blush, and he had to gather himself so he didn’t stumble over what he wanted to say. “No, Hobs, nothing like that. I don’t want to make more work for you, although we appreciate this lovely snack, of course.”

“What is young sir and young miss needing?”

“I need some information about the castle, you see, and I thought no one would know more about the castle than its most important employees.”

“Employees?” Hobs looked scandalized, and some of the others were moaning with horror. “We house elves is servants, sir, we is not so greedy as to be employees! We is not asking for pay!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Hobs, my mistake. I only said that because it’s the term I’m used to, I didn’t mean to imply anything. I’m sure you are very good servants.”

Looking only slightly mollified, Hobs nodded.

“I just thought you would know the castle’s secrets.”

“Of course we do!” piped up the tiniest elf, the one who had given Harry the fruit.

“And we is keeping them very well!” Hobs added, looking suspicious.

“Good. We need a room, Hobs, a very secret room that no one else would be able to find.”

Hobs looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione. “Young sir and young miss is knowing the rules of the castle!” he declared. “We house elves has our instructions! Headmaster Dumbledore has told us very specifically! No aid is to be given to young lovers who is wanting to have trysts!”

Harry’s cheeks flamed red, and he couldn’t look at Hermione. He could feel her beside him, though, and she was laughing. How could she laugh at him like this, when he was trying so hard to do something so important?

“No, Hobs!” Harry protested. “We’re not— we don’t— stop laughing, Hermione!” He took a deep breath, and tried to be serious. “We need a place to practice spells. A large group of us. We are afraid that there is going to be war, and we need a place to practice our spells where the High Inquisitor can’t find us and make us stop.”

Hobs abruptly looked very serious as well. "I understand, young sir. But we is protecting this castle's secrets on the order of all headmasters of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Harry nodded. "Then Dumbledore is currently your . . . your master?"

"And a very great master he is, young sir! He is most kind to house elves!"

"Dumbledore would want you to assist me. You can ask him yourself, if you need to. Just tell him that Evan Rivers needs your help, and ask permission to give it to him."

Hobs looked uncertain. "We is not to be bothering the headmaster with trivialities."

"This is not trivial," Harry assured him.

Hobs disappeared with a loud crack, making Hermione jump about three feet in the air. She whirled to him as soon as Hobs was gone.

"This is terrible!" she hissed. "They're slaves, Evan! These poor little elves are just slaves! Look at how hard they work, and they don't even get paid! I can't believe you took food from them!"

"We eat the food they make every day," Harry pointed out. "And I thought it would soften them up."

"I'm not eating anything made by slave labour," Hermione declared, but Harry grabbed her teacup before she could put it down. He cleared his throat and gave a significant glance around the room, to all the house elves who were watching them with great interest and even suspicion. Hermione snatched the cup back. "Oh, very well," she snapped. "But you and I are going to talk about this later." She took a long sip of her tea, and smiled beatifically. "What wonderful tea!" she said loudly.

Harry chuckled, and nudged her. "You're awfully cute when you're mad."

Hermione glared at him. "Don't forget that smart girls like me know twice as many hexes as you."

Harry dropped his head. "Yes, ma'am."

Hobs popped back into the room, looking aggrieved. "Young sir is right," he declared. "We has orders to give young master Rivers any aid he should require, and we are not to tell Headmaster Dumbledore about it unless the master should ask."

Harry had worried, for a second, that Dumbledore wouldn't do it, but apparently Dumbledore really did trust him. Excellent. Of course, the headmaster had probably reasoned out for himself what Harry was up to, but Harry would rather he knew about it, anyway.

"There is a room," Hobs said, standing at attention with stiff formality now that he knew he was carrying out orders. "It is known as the Room of Requirement, or the Come and Go Room. Hobs can tell you where it is and how to get in, but young master must discover the secrets of the room on his own. Hobs cannot explain everything."

"Thank you very much, Hobs. Tell me."

-o-o-o-

Harry looked around the room in amazement. The Room of Requirement was everything the house elves had promised, and more. Now he knew what Hobs had meant, that he would have to discover the secrets for himself. This room was more than just hidden, it was literally whatever he needed it to be. He had checked the Marauder's Map and he knew that it was completely undetectable, but he hadn't known what else he'd needed it to be until he was in it.

Everyone else was looking around with just as much awe as he was. It looked like his training room, with thick pads on the floors and walls. There was a shelf of books on Defensive topics, and all sorts of Dark magic detectors that came with a booklet of instructions so they could learn how to use the instruments. Best of all was what the room had plucked from Harry's mind and manifested on a small pedestal beside the bookshelf. An unadorned list of names on a long roll of parchment.

They were the names of people that Voldemort and his followers had killed. Most of them were unknown, but Harry's parents were on it. The Weasleys had looked at it and found some of their relatives. Most of the people gathered were just looking at it from a distance, afraid to read it. It was a very long list.

It was exactly what they'd needed, Harry thought. Absent a hero to hold up before them for inspiration, it was a sobering look at what Voldemort was capable of. It was an incentive to fight and a reason to learn their lessons well. Who knew that the room would be so adaptable?

"Are we ready to begin?" Harry inquired pleasantly. He had an even greater surprise in store for them, but he couldn't reveal it to them just yet. He had to wait. Unfortunately, Zacharias Smith wasn't willing to wait.

"I have a question before we start."

"Okay."

"What did you do to that Malfoy bloke? We saw you drag him off after the first meeting—"

"Impressive thing you did with his arm, that flipping thing," Ron added.

"—so I assume you Obliviated him. He's been his usual self since then, so you obviously didn't kill him. How much did you take? Does he remember seeing any of us?"

Harry thought it over, and then he glanced down at the Marauder's Map in his hands and saw the person in question coming down the hallway. He took a deep breath, anticipating what was about to happen.

"He remembers everything, but don't worry, he won't tell," he said, and opened the door. Draco stepped through, his face already set with a cold, disdainful glare. The reaction was instantaneous. Pandemonium. Everyone started shouting and even brandishing wands, asking Harry if he was crazy or if he was trying to get them all

killed. Harry let them get it all out of their system, while he and Draco both stood silently watching them. Draco finally broke his haughty pose to look at Harry with a grimace.

“Are you that surprised to find out what they think of you after all the things you’ve done to them over the years?” Harry murmured.

Draco looked startled by that, but Harry didn’t give him time to come up with a response. He lifted his hand and shouted, “Are you going to let me explain, or what?”

The din subsided.

“You want to know what he’s doing here, I imagine?”

“Bloody irresponsible” and “gone round the twist” summed up most of the responses to that.

“I could tell you, but I’ll just show you,” Harry said calmly. Then he drew his wand in a split second, pointed it at Draco, and cried, “Stupe—”

“Protego,” Draco said almost lazily, having drawn his wand almost as quickly as Harry. Harry was pleased. This was not something they’d rehearsed, and so Draco was proving his point very nicely.

“You need to learn reflexes like his,” Harry said, looking directly at Seamus Finnigan just because he seemed to have the biggest scowl on his face. “Expelliarmus,” he added, without giving Draco any hint of his intentions.

Not only did Draco hang on to his wand, he went on the offensive. He did it with a sly smile on his face that Harry didn’t like. “Serpensortia!”

A great black snake leapt from Draco’s wand and landed on the floor in front of Harry. Harry didn’t like snakes all that much, honestly, but he wasn’t about to show it. He couldn’t let Draco upstage him, not now. He looked down at the snake, which was hissing at him rather threateningly.

“Hello, there,” he said pleasantly. “You’re a beautiful thing, aren’t you?”

“Thank you,” the snake replied.

Harry jerked back in shock. He looked up at Draco and saw the other boy’s face had gone white. He wasn’t used to talking snakes, either, obviously. This couldn’t be normal. Harry looked around and saw that everyone had gone pale and quiet, but . . . they weren’t looking at the snake, they were looking at him. Why? What had he done?

“Finite Incantatum,” Draco said, looking cautiously at Harry while the snake evaporated. “You’re . . . you’re a Parselmouth?”

Harry knew he had to diffuse this situation, and right now. He knew what Parselmouth was. He didn’t remember trying to speak another language. He’d just been trying to joke. What had happened? But he had to say something, and quickly.

“No, of course not,” he laughed.

“Sure sounds like you are, mate,” Fred said from behind him, sounding very stern.

Harry tried to make it look like he was not at all concerned. “It was only a joke. You guys don’t like Parseltongue much around here, do you?”

“It’s nothing to joke about,” Ron said.

“It’s not a big deal in Brisbane,” Harry said. “When I was younger, I went to school with a girl who spoke Parseltongue. Always thought it was a bit creepy, but nothing to get so upset about. What’s got your knickers in a twist?”

“It’s a Dark talent,” Hermione murmured, suddenly standing right by him, and digging her fingers into his arm. “The only person known to speak it right now is—”

“Oh,” Harry said, as though he were only just realising. He’d known what the problem was, but he couldn’t admit it. Of course, he was just glad he hadn’t given away his own shock at apparently being a Parselmouth. “It’s to do with You-Know-Who, is it? I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” He shot Draco a glare for good measure. “If that’s the case, then it was a dirty trick you just pulled, conjuring a snake in front of everyone.”

Draco didn’t look anymore pleased with Evan’s little joke than anyone else, but he just smiled coldly. “I have to keep these meetings secret, that doesn’t mean I have to make them pleasant for anyone.”

“What do you mean, you have to keep the secret?” Neville demanded, the first time he’d spoken. He was looking at Harry, and he looked really angry. “You let him sign the parchment, and you think that means he’s going to do it?”

Harry tried to tell Neville with his eyes that he had this covered. “Well, I won’t say that the parchment isn’t deterrent enough, because I really wouldn’t encourage anyone to find out what happens if you talk. But no, I wasn’t going to trust him that far. He and I have made other arrangements. Which are obviously working, since he hasn’t told on us in the last couple of weeks.”

“What other arrangements?” Zacharias demanded.

Harry stood up as straight as he could and crossed his arms. “Look, by now, you either trust me or you don’t. It’s like I said before, your pledge not to talk doesn’t mean you’ve pledged to stay. The door’s right there.”

There was a very tense moment when feet shuffled. They were thinking about it. But no one left. They didn’t look happy, but they didn’t leave. Harry let out a deep breath. “Okay, then. Let’s get started. This week, I want to make sure you know the most basic thing that’s going to save you the most often: Protego. Before anything else, I want to make sure you can protect yourself. We won’t stop practising this spell until I’m sure you can stop anything short of the Unforgiveables. Let’s divide up into pairs, and get started.”

“Who’s pairing with snake boy?” Ron asked.

Draco blew Ron a kiss, and Fred and George had to grab hold of Ron’s arms.

“We’re going to be switching partners pretty often, so I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Harry said.

“I’ll go first,” Hermione said.

Everyone stared at her. Even Draco. Harry almost kissed her.

“Well?” she said, holding out her wand and raising her eyebrows.
“You ready, Malfoy?”

“Always, Granger,” Draco murmured.

“I’m going to walk around and watch you,” Harry announced. “I’ll give pointers where they’re needed. Obviously you need to cast spells for your partner to block, but I don’t want to see anything malicious, okay? Not this week, anyway.”

The room divided up into pairs, and Harry got to work.

“It’s Valentine’s Day tomorrow,” Harry said, throwing himself down on the floor by Hermione’s feet. He knew he sounded grumpy but wasn’t able to help it.

“I know,” Hermione muttered, drawing her legs up into her chair to make room for him. She didn’t sound much better. Of course, by all accounts, she’d spent last Valentine’s Day in the company of one Viktor Krum, who’d tried to wine and dine her and had scared her half to death with how serious he’d wanted to be about their relationship. “But why’s it got you in such a mood?” she asked over the top of her book.

“I have been asked on a date in Hogsmeade five times. Today. Three times yesterday.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Which is tragic, it really is.”

“Shut up,” he said, smiling and poking her with his finger. “They’re only asking because I’m blond and foreign.”

“And handsome, and athletic, and intelligent, and a skilled wizard, and kind-hearted,” Hermione said, eyes on her book. “Not to mention slightly reckless, which some women find romantic for reasons beyond me.”

“And a bastion of morality,” Harry smirked. “You forgot bastion of morality.”

“Bastion of arrogance, you mean,” she muttered, pushing out with her leg to knock him over.

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” he laughed, struggling back up. “I got asked out five times. Today.”

“Well, who asked?”

“Oh, lots of people,” Harry sighed. “Hannah did, and a couple of fourth years, and Parvati’s sister from Ravenclaw, Padma. And,” he coughed, “Parvati.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Is that weird, that they both asked?”

“It’s only weird if you’re going with one of them and the other gets jealous.”

“I’m not going with either of them.”

“Who are you going with?”

“Nobody,” Harry said in surprise. Geez, did she think he was trying to brag about his date? He couldn’t go out in public with any of the girls, he’d call attention to them. “I’m not dating.”

“You aren’t?” Hermione asked in surprise. “I mean, I know that you kind of started a feud with Ginny, but I didn’t think you’d let that stop you—”

“Oh, thanks,” he said dryly.

“Well, you ought to go with Parvati, at least,” Hermione said. “She’s a nice girl, I should know, and she’s taking things seriously with You-Know-Who. You’d probably enjoy yourself.”

Harry shrugged. “She’d be great, but I think Ron is starting to fancy her, after all the time they spend together on prefect duties. I just . . . well, you know Umbridge has got it in for me.” He held up his hand with its still-pink scars, making Hermione frown with worry. She’d probably sort of forgotten about that by now, lucky her. “I don’t want Umbridge to go after anyone just because they’re spending time with me.”

“Glad to see you think so much of me, then,” Hermione huffed.

“I do,” Harry said soberly. “You know that I did try to keep you at arm’s length, and that didn’t work very well. I didn’t like seeing how much it hurt you.”

Hermione looked surprised by that, and her cheeks got pink. “I didn’t realise you were trying to keep the Inquisitor away from me.”

“Well, it’s a bit late for that, I guess,” Harry sighed dramatically. “Not that I’m complaining, mind you. You’ve been most valuable when it comes to our little club. Merlin, we really need a better way to refer to it.”

“I thought you vetoed naming it.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Well, good for you. Anyway, I’m glad I can be so much help to you, call me if you need to apply my brilliant mind to getting the girls to leave you alone.”

Harry cocked his head, ignoring her waspish tone. “Well, there is something . . .”

“Oh?” she said coolly.

"You're already in pretty deep, aren't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're going to be drawing enough attention to yourself on your own. At least, if you plan to be this involved in fighting You-Know-Who."

"I do."

"Well, then, we should go to Hogsmeade together," Harry shrugged.

Hermione blinked at him, and her face went from pink to red. "Very nice, Evan. Girls love being a last resort just to keep other girls safe."

"No, I didn't mean like that," Harry protested. "I just meant that it would be nice, to just spend time with someone and not be afraid of what could happen. I mean, I would be afraid of what could happen to you, but at least being around me wouldn't be the only reason for it." He sighed. "I'm making a right mess of this." He cracked a grin. "My, but this is awkward, isn't it?"

Hermione made a harrumphing noise, most of her face hidden behind her book.

"I think what I'm trying to say is that you're strong enough to face it. Most of the girls around here aren't at all prepared for what being my friend could mean, but you are. And I'm glad. If I thought you weren't, I wouldn't be friends with you, and you have no idea how much I'd miss your friendship. I think you're wonderful. I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend Valentine's Day in Hogsmeade with than Miss Hermione Granger."

She'd put her book down. "I thought I told you that being friends means you don't have to call me Miss Hermione anymore."

"You're not mad at me?"

Hermione pushed him over again. "I didn't say that."

“But you’ll keep the girls off me tomorrow?”

Hermione sighed. “Fine. It’s not like I had anything better to do.”

Harry frowned when he looked up at her. “That’s because the boys around here are blind and stupid.”

“No, it’s because you’re the only boy I ever talk to,” Hermione sighed.

Harry put his hand over hers. “Hermione . . .”

She pushed his hand away. “I’m getting better, aren’t I? I just need time.”

“You are getting better,” he said. “I’m going to bed, I’m knackered. Don’t stay up too late studying.”

“I promise I will sleep so that I look my best for our ‘date’ tomorrow,” she smirked.

“See that you do,” Harry said, but he tugged her hair when he walked past her to the stairs.

When he lay down in bed, he was in a much better mood than he’d been in when he came into the common room. Hermione could always do that to him, but having it look like they were going out would solve so many problems. Maybe not the Ginny problem, at least not entirely, but a lot. And he’d been honest with Hermione. She was getting deep enough into this fight that pretending to date Evan Rivers wasn’t going to make it that much worse for her. Of all the girls at this school, she was the only one he thought might be able to handle it all.

“Wow, I didn’t know I was signing up to get dirty looks all day,” Hermione said, turning aside to look in the window of a clothing shop.

“Huh? Dirty looks?”

Harry turned and saw that Cho and Ginny were walking down the same street that he and Hermione were, and Ginny looked very disturbed to see the two of them together. Well, he wasn't going to let anyone ruin his day, and Ginny had no right to be upset, anyway.

"Hello, Miss Cho, Miss Ginny," he called out, waving one arm while having the other arm viciously pinched by Hermione.

"Hi," Cho said cautiously. "How are you?"

"We're fine," Harry said, putting his hand possessively on Hermione's shoulder. She took a step sideways and his hand fell back to his side. Ginny smirked. "Don't tell me you two got tired of your dates and ditched them already?"

"Oh, Evan," Cho laughed, "you know I'm dating Cedric Diggory."

"Oh, right, the Tri-Wizard champion."

"Yes. Well, he's a bit too busy with work to take a day off to walk around with a bunch of students, but he's going to have dinner with me tonight."

"Lucky you," Harry said. "Miss Ginny, it's awfully nice of you to keep Cho company today."

"Isn't it sweet of her?" Cho said gaily, slipping her arm through Ginny's. She gave Harry a hard look before turning and smiling at Ginny. "She knows that friends are more important than silly Valentine's Day crushes."

"That's what I said when Hermione told me to go out with someone else," Harry said agreeably. He knew she was getting fed up with his implying they were on a date, so he made sure the girls knew that they were only friends. He figured they'd tell half the school by the end of the day. "I thought it would be a lot more fun to spend the day with her than anyone I had a silly crush on."

Hermione's face rapidly became more happy, but Ginny's didn't. Since Cho still had her arm locked in her strong grip, all Ginny was

able to do was use the connection to turn both of them back toward the street.

"Then have fun," Ginny said, her voice very strained. "We'll see you later. Um, you wouldn't happen to know how much later, would you?"

She was trying to ask about the next meeting, Harry thought. The first few had gone very well, and he was getting eager to introduce some more difficult spells since they'd all mastered the basics of Expelliarmus, Stupefy, and the like. "Uh, hasn't quite been decided."

"Well, then," Ginny said, and dragged Cho away.

When they had turned the corner, Hermione gave Harry another hard pinch.

"Ow!"

"Well, that was mean."

"All right, it was a little. I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you ought to apologise to."

"You're not the one who'd bite my head off for trying, either."

"Well, then you'll have to live without a head, because I'm not going to let it rest until you apologise to her for the way you've acted this whole time. You got her so interested in you, then you just broke her heart!"

"Well, I'm not used to girls!" Harry protested. Most of the women he'd known in his life had been paid to do whatever was asked of them, and they weren't about to form any inappropriate attachments. His one and only real girlfriend had confused the hell out of him, and then he'd run off and left her. Which was, he thought guiltily, exactly what he'd done with Ginny. Started something, gotten confused by her, and bailed out. He looked at Hermione, and started chewing his lip. "I guess I should try harder, huh?"

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. "You guess?"

"Okay, I should. I'll apologise, I promise. But only that, I'm not going to pledge my undying devotion to her or anything."

"Merlin forbid," she said, then they walked past a bookshop and Hermione dragged him inside. "Ooo, look at this! This is a first edition!"

Harry reverently lifted the book, which was an obscure and mostly irrelevant title, but still, a first edition. He and Hermione both lifted the book and smelled the pages and sighed, then giggled at each other.

"I love the way books smell," Hermione murmured. "Especially old books."

She has got to hang out with Remus sometime, Harry thought, and talk about his last job. But thinking of how she would ever have the opportunity to chat with Remus made him think of the Order, which led him back to his own small part in the story.

"Getting back to what Ginny was trying to say . . . I don't know how I'm going to tell everyone, every time I pick a day to practice. It's got to look awfully suspicious when I go up to the same people and have clandestine conversations all the time."

"What are you thinking?" Hermione was flipping through the pages of another book, but her eyes were on him.

"Some other way to communicate. A charmed parchment, or something, so that when I write on mine, my writing appears on everyone's?"

Hermione shook her head. "Too obvious. Something smaller."

"Something people could keep in their pocket," Harry agreed. "Something that would already be in their pocket, actually." He turned out his own pockets. A handful of Galleons and Knuts, a ballpoint pen, and a little packet of Floo powder that he kept on his person at all

times. Hermione snatched up one of the coins. “Uh, if you want me to buy you something for Valentine’s Day, I’ll do it . . .”

“A coin!” she whispered. “It’s perfect! Look, there’s already the serial number along the edge, here. I could make fake Galleons so that the serial number would be the date and time of the next meeting. We’ll make your coin the master of the others so that you can change what all the others say!”

Harry gawked at her. She clutched the coin, her eyes shining, her hair practically bushing out with excitement. “You know how to do that?”

“Not yet,” she said. “But I’ll figure it out, I’m sure I’ve read about a spell that—”

Harry laughed, and yanked her in toward him to hug her. “You’re absolutely brilliant, you know that?” She looked frightened, so he let her go, but not before he kissed her cheek. “You and I can look up the spells and work on it tonight. For today, let’s just enjoy Hogsmeade.”

They went to Zonko’s, and Harry declared the product line inferior to the Weasleys.

“Oh, you don’t really approve of the way they test everything on us, do you?” Hermione asked, hands on her hips.

Harry smiled. “They only test on volunteers, you know. Besides, they are very nearly as smart as you are, at least when it comes to this stuff.”

Hermione pursed her lips, but had to agree. Some of the things they came up with were almost spectacular.

They went to Honeydukes, but they were both sparing there, only buying a handful of candy. Hermione told Harry about her parents being dentists, and Harry told her that several of the people he’d known as a child has emphasized physical health being key to mental health.

"Besides, I'm sweet enough already," he declared, giving her a triumphant smile.

"Hah," she said. "You're about as sweet as broccoli casserole."

Harry shrugged. "I like broccoli."

Hermione's smile was almost shy. "I'm a firm believer in the benefits of broccoli."

At last, the day was over, and they were forced to turn back to the castle. They agreed that it had been a lovely day, much better than it would have been if Harry had agreed to go with Padma Patil and Hermione had been cooped up in the library. As they walked up the path, which was beginning to darken with dusk, Hermione gave Harry a serious look.

"Since the visit to Hogsmeade is over, let's talk about our meetings."

Harry frowned. "Okay."

"What's going on with Malfoy, Evan? He's been showing up to the meetings, and Umbridge hasn't come in to break it up yet, but how do you know he's not reporting it all back to someone? And besides, I still don't really know why you want him there."

"It's exactly what I told you. He's a good person to use for demonstrations, because he's very quick on his feet. But more than that, he knows a lot of spells we don't know. And to be quite frank, he knows far more about the Death Eaters than we do. He's going to be useful to our group. But it's more than that, even. He's going to start seeing that he'd rather have the people on our side as his friends than his enemies. He'll start seeing that we're a threat, too."

Hermione nodded, thinking it through. "Okay. That makes sense. But this thing with keeping it secret . . . what arrangement did you come to?"

Harry huffed. "You don't trust me anymore than Zacharias does, do you?" Maybe that was unfair, but he had promised not to tell anyone about the Unbreakable Vow. It would be only too easy for people to take advantage of that if they knew, and he wasn't trying to get Draco killed.

Hermione looked like he'd slapped her. "Yes, I do! Trusting you and agreeing with you are not the same thing!"

Harry sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"But honestly, why should I trust you, Evan? You have so many secrets that I can't even begin to guess how much of yourself you're holding back. I thought we were friends."

"Hermione," he whispered, deeply hurt. "I told you my reasons."

"And then you told me that I could handle it better than anyone else, and that you felt okay about being friends with me. I know that not all of your secrets are to do with your father and the headmaster, I know there's far more to it than that. It must be that you don't trust me, however much you'd like to tell me differently."

Harry stared at her. What should he say? Should he tell her? He took a deep breath, "My name isn't Evan, it's Harry," right there on the tip of his tongue, but he hesitated. What if she was disappointed by the way he'd handled this whole situation? What if she hated him for being Harry Potter?

"Never mind," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "I can see that I'm right. I'll just leave you and your secrets alone, shall I? Don't you worry, Evan, I'll figure out how to charm the Galleons for you, because I'm valuable after all, but don't expect me to spend any time with you after this. I thought I could live with the way you held yourself back, but I can't. I thought it was just that you wanted to protect a group of people so that we could fight this war, but that's not it."

"Yes, it is, but it's also that I want to protect you."

"You know what your real problem is, Evan? It's that you've held yourself back for so long you don't even know how to let go anymore. I thought maybe I could be a good enough friend to help you with that, but apparently you don't think so. I could live with you needing to protect people. I can't live with you not trusting me."

She went back into the castle alone. Harry didn't follow her. He went down to the lake. He sat in front of the water for a while, watching the ripples made by the cold breeze across the surface, trying to think. All manner of things to think about, and they drifted through his brain without order. After all the discipline he'd imposed on his mind, all the lessons with Snape, it felt good to sort of drift like this.

He'd had to accept being a Parselmouth. He'd told Sirius about the incident right away, though he'd been a little bit cagey about the circumstances around the practice duel. Sirius had talked to Dumbledore. They'd decided it was yet another symptom of his connection to Voldemort. Harry was getting awfully sick of being connected to Voldemort, but he couldn't change it, not yet. So he'd had to accept it.

He'd had to accept a lot of things. So much that he didn't like and didn't want had become a part of his life, when all he really wanted was to go back in time a few years, to be somewhere with Sirius and free from all these responsibilities. He missed Brazil. But he was here now, and he'd had to accept that.

But there was one thing he didn't have to accept. He didn't have to accept that who he was made it impossible for him to have friends. He didn't have to accept that being Harry Potter meant Hermione couldn't be a part of his life. But as he stared out over the water, he thought about all the things the Voldemort might do to her, and he thought: maybe he didn't have to, but would he accept it?

Chapter Nineteen

Harry hadn't come to a decision about what to do with Hermione yet, but he couldn't deny that she was right about Ginny. Well, of course she was, she was always right, wasn't she? But he wasn't looking forward to dealing with this. On some deep level, he liked the constant battles with Ginny—it meant he was sticking around. It was a long-term conflict, and while he may not like the “conflict” part, he was definitely pleased about the “long-term” bit. He'd never had that before. Sirius was with him wherever he went, but he was reaching the upper limits of the amount of time he'd spent in one place. If he resolved the problem with Ginny, it would feel like it was over. Like he was wrapping things up so he could move on.

Harry didn't want to move on. He didn't want to leave this place. It was harder to be here than he'd like it to be, but he was tired of running away when things got uncomfortable. Maybe clearing things up with Ginny didn't have to feel like leave-taking. Maybe it was something he needed to do to make it easier to stay. If he thought about it that way, if he made it into a thing that cemented his place here . . . then it was something he wanted to do.

He found her after Quidditch practice, after he'd showered and was willing to put off his homework for a bit. Hermione had been avoiding him all day, even going so far as to sit farther toward the front of the room, out of her usual seat, so as not to sit next to him. Draco had tried to tease him about it, but Harry's cold look stopped him. Ever since their first meeting, when Harry had tried to cover up speaking Parseltongue, Draco had seemed just the tiniest bit afraid of him—or maybe it was just that Harry now had a very tangible control over Draco's life. Harry had been worried about that almost constantly, but that's what Quidditch practice was for. He let all the worry stream out behind him as his broom streaked across the sky, and he was feeling much better when he finally touched down. By the time he got out of the shower, he felt calm and ready to face Ginny.

It took him some time to find her. The people in his house agreed that she'd gone off somewhere with Cho Chang to study, but he had to go to Ravenclaw to find them. Even then, no one seemed to know, until he found Luna Lovegood in the library.

“They went down the secret passageway to that classroom we used for the first meeting,” she said, seeming to be far more concerned with the text she was reading than with Harry’s questions. Harry didn’t take it personally. She always seemed to be about two steps removed from whatever she was doing.

“What are they doing down there?”

“Practicing,” Luna said, and her eyes met his with conspiracy winking in the gaze. “You know, just some extra studying.”

“Oh, right,” Harry said. “They didn’t invite you?” He didn’t like that. She might be odd, but she deserved to have someone to practice with . . .

“Oh, they did, but I think I’ve mastered this week.”

Harry almost laughed at how casually she said it. She hadn’t seemed to have much trouble with any of the spells they were learning, other than the Incarcerous spell. Harry suspected it was just a difficulty with intent, on that one; she was too free-spirited to want people to be bound up. She was a very good witch, going at each new spell with a single-minded determination until it was perfect and all without seeming to attach any personal feeling to it. Well, he’d see how she did with the Patronus spell soon enough, that was impossible to master without personal feeling. Harry was looking forward to teaching that one. He’d gotten his first corporeal Patronus at an early age, but that’s because Sirius could be a real slave-driver about Defensive spells. And now that the Order was growing suspicious of the Dementors guarding Azkaban prison, it was high time to teach it to the others.

“Well, thanks for your help, Luna. I’ll see you around.”

“Yes, I think you will,” she murmured seriously.

Harry went down the passageway to the second-floor classroom, and he stood outside the door, thinking. He couldn’t hear anything, which might mean they had finished and gone, but he was hoping meant

they'd gotten good at the silencing spell he'd taught them. And he was thinking that bursting into the room would be a good test of how well the lessons had improved their combat skills. If he could catch them off-guard, he'd know there was still a lot of work to be done. That decided, he tried the door and found it locked. That was good, but the fact that a simple Alohamora took care of it wasn't. They needed something a little stronger to keep the door closed. The only people who could possibly find them in this room would have the worst kind of intentions, and they needed to be taking that into account.

Except for the fact that you came down here to find them and you don't have any bad intentions . . .

He shielded himself first, then flung the door open and struck. Cho fell to the ground in a complete Body-Bind, but the spell bounced harmlessly off Ginny's Shielding Charm, and his own barely stood up to the Bat-Bogey hex she threw at him. It was only then that she gasped, "Oh, Evan, it's you!"

He grinned. "That was excellent, Ginny! That's exactly right, to protect yourself before retaliating!"

She grinned back and accepted his congratulatory handshake. Harry let Cho wait until he'd praised Ginny before he released her. She stood up with a rueful look and red cheeks. "I guess I still need to work on my reaction time," she said.

"You and half the group," Harry shrugged. "I came into our bedroom last night and had Seamus and Dean down before Ron figured out what was going on. Neville's the one who got me, though. When I turned my back on him to deal with Ron, he took my wand."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "I guess he didn't learn his lesson after he saw what you did to Draco."

"What do you mean?"

"You're plenty dangerous without a wand, that's what."

"That's the idea," he drawled. "But that's something we'll keep amongst the people who saw it happen, right?"

Ginny and Cho gave him surprised looks. "Okay . . ."

"Element of surprise, ladies."

"Right."

"Oh, makes sense."

"Evan, what are you doing here, anyway?" Cho asked.

"Oh . . ." Harry felt his face going red. "I wanted to talk to Ginny for a few minutes, that's all. Luna said you were down here. You guys can finish up if you want."

"I think we're done here, actually," Ginny said. She pointed to a pile of broken wood in the corner. "That used to be one of the chairs, until Cho demolished it."

"Good work," Harry said, observing the jagged splinters. "And you, Ginny, how's Reducto working for you?"

Ginny shrugged modestly. Cho pointed to the other corner that contained rubble and said, "That's her work."

Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise. There was barely anything that made it identifiable as a piece of furniture. It was mostly sawdust. "Wow. You're pretty dangerous, there, Ginny."

"Don't you forget it," she muttered.

Harry just smiled and shrugged that one off. He was here to apologise, after all. There was always the chance that he'd completely screw it up, but barring that, she probably wouldn't be using her considerable power to destroy him.

"I'll let you guys talk," Cho said, backing out of the room.

“Wait a minute,” Harry said. “Let me walk back up the tunnel with you.”

“Why?” Cho asked suspiciously.

“If someone sees you coming out of it alone, they’ll get curious and investigate, and I’d rather keep this room a secret so we can keep using it.”

“And if we come out of it together?”

“Well, Miss Cho . . .” Harry said, and winked at her.

She and Ginny both laughed and made a joke about all three of them exiting the tunnel that made even Harry blush, then Ginny agreed to wait for him until he saw Cho back up through the tunnel. He did so quickly, and there wasn’t anything to worry about, since no one was around. When he went back down, he had to stop outside the room and take a deep breath. Then he went in.

“I’m here to tell you that I’m sorry,” he said immediately.

Ginny sucked in a breath. “You are?” she asked, and she sounded so vulnerable that Harry’s guilt skyrocketed.

“Yes,” he said firmly, cementing it in his own mind as well as hers. “I made a real mess of this, you know. I didn’t mean to. I meant what I said all that time ago: that when you’re just being yourself, you’re a great girl. The thing is, I’ve got too many hang-ups of my own, and I don’t know how to deal with other people’s. It’s just . . .” He shrugged. “I don’t know how to get close to people, it’s not something I’m used to. And I’m not used to anyone being around long enough that it matters.”

Ginny didn’t roll her eyes, but he could see that it took real effort to hold back.

“I know that sounds pathetic, but it’s true. I never really had any friends before I came here, and the longest I’ve ever dated a girl was a few weeks. I knew that I didn’t want us to be dating, but I went

about it in the worst possible way. I shouldn't have picked a fight, and I shouldn't have hurt your feelings. That was wrong of me. You deserve to be treated better than that, and I'm sorry that I did it. Do you believe me?"

"Believe that you're sorry?" Ginny confirmed. He nodded. She cracked a nervous smile. "Yeah, I do. I've acted like enough of a, er, a witch to be sure that you were good and sorry."

Harry wasn't sure if he was supposed to smile at that or not, so he tried not to. "Well, I am. I think we've both figured out that we're not the right people for each other, but I wish we'd figured that out without getting hurt by it."

Ginny seemed to accept that, nodding a little. "Me, too. I need to apologise, while we're here. I . . . I should have just accepted that I'm not every man's fantasy or whatever I got so upset about. You were right about me, I think. I'm used to boys chasing me, I'm not used to chasing one. I should have accepted that you didn't want me, and it was me being arrogant that made it so hard to see."

"Uh . . . for the record, I kinda did. Want you. But anyway, that's not really the point. The point is, I want us to be able to move on. I know that this year has been really hard for you, with Quidditch and all, and especially what happened with your father, and . . . you've actually stood up to it amazingly well. I don't blame you for getting upset with me, I was a jerk, and you had enough stress."

Ginny looked down and sighed. "The thing with Quidditch has been very hard," she said quietly, painfully. "But everything that's happened this year . . . I needed it. I needed to grow up. The things I was worried about were just stupid and juvenile, and I needed all of that to wake me up to how childish I've been, to make me see that I'm not that special. And to make me see what's going on in the world, the things that I really need to be focusing on."

Harry smiled, at last. "Not special? Didn't you see what you did to that chair, or whatever it used to be? You're a good fighter, you know. I'm glad you've gotten so focused on this, even though I really wish none of had to be worried about it. You've been . . . I've been really

impressed with you recently. I have a lot of respect for the way you've dealt with everything that's been thrown at you this year." She'd grown up more than she thought she had, in his opinion.

"And I think I need to tell you that the things I accused you of aren't true, exactly. You impress me, too. I thought you had this high-and-mighty attitude, but . . . I just didn't see you for who you really are. You just overthink everything. You're so awfully serious about all of this, and I finally see that you are the way you are because you're so worried about this war. You think it's up to you to keep us all safe, that you have to be the best possible asset in case the fighting gets so bad they need us kids. And while it's kind of a hero complex, I can respect it. You're right, I don't want to date you. But I do respect you."

"Mutual respect. I can live with that. You?"

Ginny smiled at him and shrugged. "Yeah, that's good for me."

"Well, then." He put an arm over her shoulders and walked toward the door. "Let's go study, shall we? I'd rather not have anyone in our group tell a professor they didn't do their homework, but if they'd like to see an exemplary Reductio . . ."

Ginny giggled as they entered the tunnel. "Aw, your father would love it."

"Probably."

They exited the tunnel, looking around cautiously for any curious eyes. While Harry could have laughed off the idea of having a secret snogging session with Cho Chang because it was so silly, he couldn't say the same for Ginny Weasley. If they were to ever have a secret snogging session, it would be because he was interested in getting serious with her, and that wasn't likely. Ginny was like a mirror held up to the parts of him that wanted to be a simple, open, bold Gryffindor . . . and that was something he couldn't be, and hadn't been in a long time. Dating her would be a nightmare of trodden-down wishes and constant competition, and they'd throttle each other. He'd rather not let the school think they were together, because they'd he'd feel honour-bound to date her and save her reputation.

And then he'd be getting a good hard look at his own stubborn streak and reckless courage in someone who could indulge in it while he couldn't.

Is it immoral to tell the Sorting Hat where to put someone? I really should have been a Slytherin, I know that, but . . . the people I'm living with are what I wish I was.

They should have looked harder before they exited the tunnel. They didn't see anyone immediately and they felt safe, but then someone came around the corner and not only surprised them, but made Harry's heart drop straight through the stones beneath him to the next storey of the castle.

"Why, Mr. Rivers, Miss Weasley," she sang out. "Whatever were you doing alone here at this time of night?"

"Just doing a bit of studying," Harry said indifferently.

"Which you could not have done in your common room, or the library, I suppose?"

"Too noisy," Harry shrugged.

"With too many eyes, I suspect," Umbridge said triumphantly, her mean little eyes gleaming with glee. "I do not appreciate your pathetic attempts at lying, Mr. Rivers. You have broken the rules regarding proper conduct, and worse yet, you have seduced an innocent young girl into breaking them. This is atrocious behaviour, and I cannot allow it. You will be seeing me for detention, Mr. Rivers, every night for a week. You will use some of that time to write a letter of apology to Miss Weasley, and another to her parents. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry whispered, his stomach clenching in dread.

Ginny was gaping at Umbridge with shock and anger, but Harry squeezed her hand hard and shook his head with warning. Umbridge was absolving her of guilt to be able to heap more onto Harry, and Ginny had better just take what she was given and keep her mouth shut. Harry could deal with Umbridge, he wasn't about to let Ginny

take the blame when this had been his idea. He could have waited until she came back to Gryffindor, and that would have been smarter. Or maybe it was just all these thoughts he was having about Gryffindor bringing a certain chivalrous instinct to the surface. Ginny still looked angry, but she sighed and stayed quiet.

“You will return to your dormitory, Miss Weasley,” Umbridge said. “I will keep Mr. Rivers here until I am quite certain you will not meet up again on the way. I will make sure he does not take advantage of your innocence again.”

Harry nearly laughed at that, but since Ginny was doing such an admirable job of keeping her mouth shut, he supposed he ought to do the same. He dreaded what would happen when word got out about the reason for his detention, as it inevitably would. Well, it was possible that no one would know which girl was involved. At least he hoped that. An unnamed girl was a far more interesting addition to his reputation than one whose identity was known, when you got right down to it. Maybe Umbridge, in making him out to be the big, bad, werewolf, would keep the poor girl's reputation safe.

He was sick when he thought about how he'd explain it to Hermione, the one person he thought might care, but she'd believe him if he said it wasn't true and it was just Umbridge picking on him. This was, of course, assuming she ever talked to him again. What was he going to do about Hermione?

As it turned out, he didn't have to do anything about Hermione. She came to him just after dinner the next day. He was trudging his way to upstairs to be sure he was presentable, so Umbridge couldn't criticise him, and Hermione stopped him and pulled him away from the main path. She didn't go too far away, or into an empty room, so it obviously wasn't to do with their lessons. That was hopeful, maybe that meant it was about them.

The thing was, he hadn't realised how important her friendship had become. It had crept up on him, and suddenly she was the one he was always confiding in, making plans with, turning to for help with their Defense class. When she wasn't available, he didn't know what to do. He'd started to turn to the left (she always walked on his left, he

didn't know why) a million times over the last two days, to say something to her, but she was never there. Sometimes Ron or Draco was, but he couldn't just tell them things. That was asking for trouble.

And so, he'd decided, he'd do pretty much anything to keep her around, even if it meant pretending he was wrong for protecting her even when he didn't think he was.

"Hermione, I'm so glad you're willing to talk to me. I want to apologise."

"Oh, just stop," she muttered. Her smile was wry and private. "You know perfectly well you don't have anything to apologise for."

"I don't?"

"Of course not. I was being unfair to say what I did, and it's not your fault that I got upset. I, I, well I . . ." She was looking at the ground, stammering, her voice whispery quiet. Like she'd been when he first met her. He hated that, he never wanted her to act like that around him. He put his hand under her chin and raised her face. "I wanted something I can't have, that's all," she said, a little too defiantly. "You never promised me what I was asking for, and I'm the one who needs to apologise, not you. I was being irrational."

Harry had let go of her chin, but he did reach out and take her hand. "Can I at least apologise for letting things go this long? I wanted to find you later that night and try to work this out, but I thought you needed some time."

"I did," she admitted. "But really, I understand. I won't push you like that again. Friends don't have to tell each other every little thing, do they? I can live with the fact that there's things you can't tell me for some reason. I . . . have a few things I want to share with you sometime, maybe, but not right now, and you've been far more accepting of that than I have."

Harry had gathered enough from talking to Hermione and hearing the gossip to have understood what had really happened to Hermione

down in the dungeons last spring, but he did want to hear it from her, sometime. But he hadn't pushed her about it too much.

"So . . . we're okay, then?" Harry quizzed her. He was never entirely sure about these things unless somebody said so.

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, Evan, we're fine."

She even allowed a brief hug. He didn't want to push his luck by making it too strong of an embrace, and he really had to go, anyway.

"I have to get going, I have detention," he muttered.

"Not with Umbridge?" she gasped.

"Yes," he sighed.

"Why?"

Harry blushed. "She saw me and Ginny alone and made some assumptions."

"Ah. Were you and Ginny doing anything untoward?"

Harry scowled. "Of course not! If you must know, I was apologising to her, because I knew you were right about the way I treated her."

Hermione blinked a few times, processing that. "Oh. Good."

"Yeah," he shrugged. "We agreed that we respect each other and that we'd kill each other if we tried to date. That's about the best I can do."

"You did fine," she assured him. "Now, go, before you're late for your detention."

"I shudder to think. Do you want me to come help you work on that Galleon idea after?"

"No, I get the feeling you'll need some rest after this. We'll work on it tomorrow."

“Okay.”

With things resolved between both Ginny and Hermione, Harry walked into Umbridge’s office with a level of confidence he hadn’t expected to have. She could do what she liked to him, but it wasn’t going to change that he’d done the right thing. He had that going for him.

It was on his fourth day of detention that Harry finally broke down. He’d been treating his own hand over the last few days. At first it had been stupid lines: “I am not above the rules” over and over until he was so numb with boredom that his hand barely even hurt. But the fourth night, she’d made him compose long, sickly-sweet apology letters to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny, and it had taken forever. The writing had turned the entire back of his hand, all the way from wrist to knuckles, into one great oozing mass. It was disgusting, and he was so shaken and exhausted that he was afraid to brew anything himself.

He stumbled into the darkened common room, thinking that it was too late for anyone to even be around (Umbridge had imposed an earlier curfew recently) and so worn down that he was actually considering Flooing home and asking Sirius for help. But one person was still awake, laying on her stomach in front of the banked fire with a book open in front of her. Harry stopped and stared at her dumbly.

“Hermione, what are you doing up?”

It was a stupid question to ask when he could have wept with relief upon seeing her, the pain in his hand so intense that he was cradling against his chest, wrapped in his robes. He hadn’t broken, though. Not in front of her. He wouldn’t let her make him into a weeping child or a liar.

Hermione sat up, revealing the large, shallow bowl that had been sitting beside her while she studied.

“I was keeping some essence of murtlap warm,” she said quietly. “But be quiet, or Professor McGonagall will have to come send us to bed.”

“Hermione, you are so amazing,” he moaned, going to his knees beside her, keeping his hand drawn in to himself.

“I know,” she smiled, and reached out to take his hand. Then she gasped as her fingers made contact with the sticky sleeve of his robes. “Oh, Evan . . .”

“Don’t nag me again about this,” he begged quietly. “I can’t deal with it right now.”

“I’m not going to,” she sighed. “I’d like to, but I won’t. All the people who could help already know how awful she is. I just wish there were someone else she could take out all this violence on.” Tears ran down her cheeks as she worked, Transfiguring an empty cup that had been left on a table into a bowl and using the Aguamenti charm to fill it with water. She cleaned his hand tenderly before she treated it with the murtlap, and Harry found himself relaxing more and more as she worked. She was going to take care of him, and she wasn’t going to make him defend himself anymore.

“I . . . Oh, I promised I wouldn’t . . .” she mumbled.

“What is it?”

“Questions you can’t answer.”

“I’ll try,” he whispered, sitting now with his back against a chair and his head tilted back while she worked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking, since it’s become quite clear what you’re thinking . . . What would she do that would be so much worse than this, if you rebelled against it?”

Harry didn’t even move his head. “You’re right, I can’t answer.”

“But you have an answer,” she replied. “It’s why you’ve wanted this kept quiet, to protect yourself from the truly awful thing she would do to you if she couldn’t do this. I know you don’t want to say. It’s okay, I have an idea.”

Harry's eyes popped open and he looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said softly, her hands pressing over his gently, soothingly. "It's okay, I don't mean anything. I told you I wouldn't pry anymore."

"But you'll still do all this for me," he sighed, staring down at his hand, which was now neatly wrapped in bandages and hardly any pain at all. Which was some relief, but not enough. The tension in his shoulders had given him a vicious headache and he felt shaky. He was tired, anyway, the pressures of OWL year combined with leading a secret Defense class and being the shining hope of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were catching up with him. But it was the guilt that really choked him. Hermione was too good of a friend, much more than he deserved.

"If you want to tell people you burned it or something, I'll back you up," Hermione said, her voice seeming to float like mist through his weary perceptions.

"You'd really do that?"

"If you need me to, of course I would."

Harry opened his mouth to say thank you and he couldn't get anything out. His throat was clogged with something, he could barely breathe. Hermione's hand stretched out and touched his face, and he sucked in a deep breath.

"It's okay, I know you're tired and in pain. Just go to bed. We can talk in the morning."

"Why?"

Hermione's face looked patient. "I think you're too tired to talk right now, that's all."

“No, why . . . why do you want to be friends with me? Don’t you know that it will only get you hurt?”

“I can hardly help it,” she said, “after everything you’ve done for me. I know you didn’t plan on it, but we are friends now, and that means a great deal to me.”

“Hermione,” he whispered. He sat up straight and reached out and took her hands. “I have to tell you. I really have to.”

She squeezed his hands and said nothing.

After how much he’d dreaded this moment, now that he was in it, he felt nothing but relief and true amazement that there was someone he could say it to. The dam in his throat flooded over with tears and he released a harsh sob. She drew his head onto her shoulder and he let the tears come, even though he never cried, and knew that she wouldn’t think less of him for it. “My name . . . isn’t Evan.”

She stiffened, but only said, “Oh?”

“It’s Harry. I’m Harry Potter.”

“I know,” she said calmly.

He yanked his head off her shoulder and sat back. “What?” he yelped.

“Shh, shh,” she urged, waving her hands. “Well, okay, I didn’t know, but I was pretty sure.”

“How could you know that? You somehow figured it out because of my detentions with Umbridge?”

Hermione shrugged. “Yes, that. Plus you dye your hair.”

“You knew that?”

She shrugged again. “Oh, we girls will gossip and we decided your hair colour doesn’t match your skin tone. Most of them just think you’re trying to impress them or something—although, you really

don't want to know Luna's theory—but none of them know how many secrets you have. I do. And I knew that you were trying to hide who you are. There are only so many reasons to do that. Once I looked at your situation with Umbridge, and the fact that your dad had only supposedly known Professor Lupin a few months before he let him move into your house, and the way you and Neville always seem to be so tense around each other, well . . . it all added up. I shouldn't try to make myself sound so smart, I wasn't totally sure until a few days ago."

"Let me guess, the day you apologised."

"I thought you had a pretty good reason to be keeping secrets."

Harry buried his face in his hands, trying not to cry anymore. "I'm sorry."

"What have you got to be sorry about?" she said, scooting up beside him so she could rub her hand over his back.

"Being born," he muttered.

"Don't talk like that."

"Fine. I just . . . I had to come back, don't you see? He'd started going after anyone who knew me, trying to find me, and he was going to start hurting my . . . hurting people. He wanted me so badly he was going to hurt a bunch of innocent people, and I had to protect them."

It felt so good to say all this to someone, but why did that have to mean that he would cry the whole way through? This was totally embarrassing.

Hermione's hand moved in circles. "I understand." Then she went stiff and her hand stilled. "That's why you've been so adamant about the fact that he's got a body again. You know. How do you know, though?"

Harry shook his head miserably. "I was there. I saw it. I fucking gave it to him!"

“What?” she whispered.

“He— took— my— blood. He tied me up and took it to make his body because he thought I owed it to him or something, and he was going to kill me, only I got away. And that’s how we caught Peter Pettigrew, Pettigrew was helping him and he’s the one that gave me to Voldemort, took me by surprise, but I captured him and got him arrested so Sirius could be pardoned.” Harry realised he had started to babble, and he shut up.

“When I was reading about You-Know-Who, studying him, I read that he was afraid of the headmaster, of Dumbledore, I mean. That Dumbledore was the only wizard powerful enough to stand against him.”

Harry nodded. “So you think I’m doomed, too?”

Hermione’s hand moved over his back again. “No, I don’t. I just thought that was probably why you were here, at Hogwarts. Staying under his protection.”

“Yeah, somewhat. But he and Sirius have been very insistent that I need to get my OWLS and my NEWTS. They’re convinced I’ll be the one who survives this and I need to focus on my future. Well, actually, I think they’re both expecting me to get killed but they want me to think positively until then.”

Hermione sighed and laid her cheek against his shoulder. “I figured out who you were, but I hadn’t had a chance yet to think about all the horrible weight you’re carrying. Ev— Harry . . . does that mean you think you have to fight Voldemort or something?”

Harry leaned his head over and laid his cheek on her head for a moment, just appreciating all the comfort she was giving him. She was the one who hated physical contact and she’d barely stopped touching him this whole time. She was being absolutely selfless, but his confession had him so drained that all he could do was accept it and try to appreciate it.

"I don't want to, no. But I don't think he'll stop coming after me. I think I have to fight him to keep him from hurting everyone around me, instead. If it was just that he was a horrible Dark wizard, I'd take my place in the fighting ranks with everyone else and do my part, whatever it was. But whatever happened when I was an infant, whatever it was that weakened him so much, has made it personal. He wants it to be personal, even if I don't, so I have to try."

"That's what this is all about, isn't it? These Defense lessons, all your exercise, all your studies. You're training yourself."

"Well, I'm smart, but not so smart that I could have taught myself all of this. Sirius had a hand in it."

"Oh. Yes. Sirius Black. That would be the beloved Professor Rivers, would it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"I can see that, now that I think of it. I've seen a picture or two of him when he was young, in a couple of books. I can't believe I didn't recognize him."

"You didn't recognize me, either," he said. "And I've been told I look exactly like my dad."

"Oh. Yes, I guess you do. Or you would, if your hair was the right colour and you were wearing those glasses he was wearing in the pictures."

"My hair is that colour, and I used to wear glasses. I'm trying not to be recognised."

"Yes, I gathered," she replied with a bit of sarcastic humour in her voice. "But why, really? Doesn't You-Know-Who know that you're here?"

“Voldemort,” he said distinctly, “does. But not very many other people. I haven’t been here since I was eight, and I didn’t know anyone here or what was really going on. I needed time to figure everything out.”

“When were you planning to tell people?”

“I just told you,” he sighed, leaning back against the chair again, Hermione sitting beside him but no longer touching him. Her eyes were bright with curiosity, and here he was too exhausted to explain anymore.

“Everyone else, though.”

“We’ve been talking about it. Probably after the OWL exams are finished.”

“Oh. That’s only a few months from now.”

“I know. But it’s time for that.”

“You’re hardly going to be able to breathe for all the reporters and curious people wanting to know everything.”

“Not to mention Death Eaters trying to bring me to Voldemort,” Harry sighed. “I know. But I can’t hide forever.”

Hermione lifted his bandaged hand and kissed his fingers. “You’re very brave— Harry. Don’t worry, I promise I won’t call you that in front of anyone.”

“Thanks. But I’m not brave. I can’t afford to be.”

Hermione smiled. “Brave enough to trust me.”

“That’s not bravery, it’s common sense. You’re a good friend, Hermione. But now that you know, you wouldn’t . . . I know you won’t want to keep this up, now.”

Hermione crossed her arms over herself and looked deep in thought. “But Harry, it’s you who wouldn’t want to be friends with me. I’m not

anybody important. I want to fight You-Know-Who, I want to help with the war, because your being here doesn't change that he's still everyone's problem. What he does is evil, and I want to help work against him. But I'm not powerful, or well-connected, or anything like that. Now that you don't have to pretend when you're around me anymore . . . well, listen, I understand. I really do."

"What?" Harry said in surprise. "How could you think that? I don't need someone to be well-connected to be friends with them. I just thought now that you knew how dangerous it would be, you'd want to back off."

Hermione was wringing her hands now. "Listen, I can't deny that I'm a little bit scared. Okay, a lot scared. But I said I would fight him, and I will. If he takes a special interest in me because he wants to hurt you, then I'll . . . well, I'd deal with it. If you still wanted to be friends, anyway."

Harry stared at her in shock. "And you think I'm brave?" he muttered. "Hermione, you'd really— you'd stay with me?"

"If you're crazy enough to want me around."

Harry let out a wild laugh, but stopped before he could make too much noise. "Don't you know how much I think of you? You're my best friend! You're a brilliant witch, and you're the only person I know who reads more than I do, and you'd actually risk Voldemort to be my friend, that's just . . . I can't . . ."

He leaned forward and hugged her. She let him.

"I still want you around," he assured her. "Who else is going to charm those Galleons for me?"

She giggled, but it was weak. She was tired and wrung out and weepy, just like he was. She laid her head against his shoulder again, and sighed.

"It's definitely not the right time, but I think I could tell you what happened last year. Now that I know we're still going to be friends.

Don't worry, it can wait. I'm just glad to know that I think I could. I guess that whole thing seems sort of petty to you, doesn't it?"

Harry tried to imagine what he would have done tonight, knowing that Hermione was there to talk to, and not talking. If he'd had his friend right there and his need to share his burden was piling up, and he was trying to hold back because it wasn't the right time.

"It doesn't seem petty at all," he assured her. "I want to be able to do this for you, like you've done for me. If you're ready, then you should. No time like the present."

She pulled away from him. She looked down. "No, no, not tonight, I don't think," she stammered. Her hair fell over her face, covering it.

Harry reached out and brushed her hair back. "No more hiding. If I can do it, then you can. I'm here, Hermione."

She began to shiver. There were memories in her eyes, haunting memories. Her hands twisted together until Harry grabbed them. Her shivering was almost violent, and her breath was too quick and shallow. She didn't cry, though. Not like he had.

"Hermione, I'm here," he said again. "I'm right here."

She broke. "He raped me," she gasped.

Harry rubbed his thumbs over her hands. "I know. I mean, I guessed."

She looked up for just a moment. "Oh."

"But I want you to tell me."

She nodded jerkily. "I went off with him to comfort him when he lost the tournament. He was so upset. He accused me of helping Cedric Diggory and he got in this rage and said I was sleeping with Cedric and trying to keep him, keep Viktor, from winning, and he started hitting me, and I didn't . . . I didn't . . ." She was shaking so hard that Harry let go of her hands and pulled her against him. "I couldn't stop him, he was so strong, and I was bleeding and my face hurt and I

didn't even know he'd torn my clothes off until he was already—" She gasped for breath. "You know, right?" she said, her voice pleading with him not to make her say anything more.

He wished he hadn't spent his tears on himself, he should have saved them for her, she deserved them. She sat hunched over and shaking, her arms crossed over herself for protection, haunted and lost. He couldn't take it away, much as he wanted to. All he could do was hold onto her until the shaking stopped, and hope that helped. What was he supposed to say now? What was his role, here, as her friend, besides hunting Krum down and castrating him? Shouldn't he say something?

"It won't ever happen again," he said. "I won't let anything like that happen to you, not ever. I wish I'd been here, I wish I'd been your friend last year so I could have kept this from happening . . ." If I'd been here I would have beaten his arse into the ground, I would have killed him, I would have had him begging for—

Hermione's shaking was slowing down. She was relaxing. "Don't," she whispered. "It's not your fault. We can't think like that, neither of us can think like that."

"Okay," he said. "Okay, we won't. At least I'm here now. I'll keep you safe now."

Hermione sighed, and relaxed against him even more. "Yes. I know you will."

Book Two:Awakening

Arc Three

Still A Child

Why do you hesitate?

You could just tell me.

Why pull your punches?

Just hit me already.

What plots do you hide?

You think I don't see them.

What love held in check?

Your embrace could be everything.

Are you so ignorant?

You think you can crush me.

Are you so foolish?

I won't just believe you.

Am I enough for all this?

I fight such strong enemies.

Am I still a child?

Perhaps, but awakening.

“And this is who I am when, when I don't know myself anymore

And this is what I choose when it's all left up to me

And this is how it looks when I am standing on the edge

And this is how I break apart when I finally hit the ground

And this is how it hurts when I pretend I don't feel any pain

And this is how I disappear when I throw myself away"

"Breathe Into Me" — Red

A/N: I am making a slight change to my outline, so I am changing the placing of the third arc to right now. Enjoy the poetry, I'll have the next chapter posted tomorrow sometime. Somebody asked, so I'll let you all know here: There are going to be 24 chapters to this story, so there are 5 more to go. I will probably take a short break (a couple of weeks) before I begin posting the third book, which will probably be 28 chapters and will cover the time period of HP books 6-7. See you soon!

Chapter Twenty

The night that Harry and Hermione spilled out their secrets in the common room began one of the happiest times in Harry's life, no matter how short that time might be. He had not ever expected to feel truly happy in England, even for all his feelings of belonging there. It was his place, that was true, but there was too much wrong with it—the place his parents had been killed, the place Sirius had been framed, the place Voldemort had taken his blood—but now it was also the place containing what little family he had and the girl he considered his best friend by far.

He was constantly thinking of things he wanted to tell her, things that added to the story of who he was. Sometimes he shared them with her, sometimes the years of secrecy choked him and he stayed silent. They were studying all the time now, for their OWL exams and practicing the spells he was teaching their private class (which they had, after much debate that involved a lot of insults between Draco and everybody else and suggestions like Association of People Who'd Like To Kick a Certain Slytherin Arse and Slytherins Lowering Themselves For No Good Reason They Could Think Of, settled on the Defense League, the DL for short). Harry was constantly interrupting their studies to tell Hermione something he wanted her to know, something no one but Sirius had ever known.

The thing he'd been most concerned about, the thing he'd debated the most over telling her, turned out to be the easiest part. The prophecy. She'd been quiet while he told her what he knew of it, the way Sirius had chosen to deal with it, and about getting drunk when he was eleven to make it easier to bear. He'd told her why he was really here, why he thought the prophecy should simply be destroyed and forgotten about, and why he wished Voldemort had never gotten a hint of it. (He did not tell her what he knew of how Voldemort had heard about it, as that was not really his secret to tell.)

He'd thought Hermione would be horrified, would drill him for details of the prophecy, would start treating him weirdly like Dumbledore and some of the people in the Order did. He could handle a lot of things in his life, he could not handle his best friend looking at him with starry-eyed awe or mild suspicion. So when she asked for time to think

about it before she said anything, his heart sank. They turned back to their studies, translating runes with feverish intensity, knowing their OWLs were creeping closer and closer. Ten minutes later, Hermione lifted her eyes from her notes and said that she agreed with Harry but that she hoped he was taking seriously the faith other people had in prophecy.

"I do take that seriously. I mean, how could I not, with the way Dumbledore is about it?"

"Then you ought to understand why that copy can't be destroyed."

Harry sighed, fiddling with his quill (Hermione was making him use it instead of a regular pen). "I do understand. I just don't like it."

"Oh. All right, then."

And they hadn't said another word about it. Hermione understood. She had seemed to grasp intuitively what the prophecy had meant to Dumbledore and Neville, for she suddenly stopped commenting on the tension Harry and Neville showed in their interactions. She understood a lot of things without Harry needing to explain it, and that, more than anything, was what made him so much happier. It wasn't that he had someone he could trust enough to talk to. It was that he had someone that understood him well enough that he didn't actually have to say anything. It was such a blessed relief, after the year he'd had. The constant lies, always guarding his tongue and his mind. The Order acting like he was their Saviour and their Doom by turns and making him feel like a pariah every time he went to a meeting (well, except Mrs. Weasley, she'd practically tried to adopt him and managed to feed him something every time she saw him). The Quidditch team adored him and they were weeks away from winning the Cup, while Delores Umbridge despised him and thought he was a conniving liar bent on usurping her beloved Minister of Magic. Neville hadn't quite decided how he felt about Harry yet, it didn't seem, while the person who ought to be his arch-enemy, Draco, was always pushing the limits of their forced connection but never stepping over the line and never totally betraying their "friendship".

Then there was Hermione. She was none of those things, none of those people. He wasn't kept up nights worrying about her or trying to analyse her. Their friendship had come naturally, and Harry was the closest he'd ever been to a person, emotionally speaking. She was always there for him, being whatever he needed her to be—listening ear, study partner, his right hand in the Defense League, or just the person he sat next to in class and tickled with the feather of his quill. And all she needed from him was the same commitment. Well, that wasn't so hard.

"Perfect!" Harry declared. "Again!"

She and Neville raised their wands once more and sent the tongue-tying spell flying between them. Neville's Shield Charm held up, hers didn't. She felt her tongue seize up, and she thought Expelliarmus with all her strength, but Neville's wand only gave the most feeble twitch. Neville reversed it at Harry's nod and let her go.

She sighed. "Well, I tried."

Harry flashed her a little smile before he turned to the group and started talking. He usually used Draco or Neville for demonstrations, but sometimes he'd use her. She didn't think either of the boys got a smile of encouragement before he analysed their performance for the group, and she decided she'd talk to him very sternly about it later. Just because she was a girl didn't mean she was so fragile she couldn't hear what he thought about her spellwork!

It would have to be later, though. She had someone else to talk to this time.

"Dad assures me that the professors will eventually start instructing the students in non-verbal spells. But as you can see, we can't really afford to wait for lessons. If that spell gets past your shield, you're helpless without some ability at non-verbal casting."

"Let's see you do it, then, if you're so brilliant," Draco spoke up.

“I’m not exactly proficient myself, which is why we’re practicing,” Harry shot back. “Anyway, this is not the first spell many wizards will think of in a combat situation—”

That was an understatement. Hermione had never heard of this spell, and Harry only once seen it used between two people speaking German. It had taken a solid week of library work for them to track down the incantation.

“—so it’s one of the first you should use,” Harry said. “There is always the chance that your opponent doesn’t perform well non-verbally. If your first Stunning spell doesn’t take them down, cast it immediately, on the chance that it will keep your opponent from being able to retaliate. And never assume that they don’t know the spell. Get better at guarding against this tongue-tying curse.” He paused for a moment, bit his lip, thinking hard about something. Everyone waited quietly to hear what it was he was debating over.

Then Draco fell to the floor, stiff as a board. Everyone jumped back, then they all started laughing. Harry released Draco and helped him back up, the blond boy scowling and muttering dire threats. Hermione beamed at Harry, and he grinned when he saw her. He’d spent all week working on that, and he’d never quite gotten it until now. She tried to tell him that she was proud with her eyes, not wanting to embarrass him in front of the DL.

“As you can see, that took serious effort on my part, and I’ve been practicing already. It’s going to take a lot of work from all of us before we’re any good at this, and I don’t expect anyone to master it in the time we have left this term. But if you can use it even once during a fight, it’s going to be a huge benefit to you. It’s just something for you to work on when you have time, it’s nothing I’m going to expect you to be ready to use in duels next week. But the tongue-tying curse, that you should be able to cast and block at our next meeting.” He looked at the clock on the wall, which had manifested itself when their lesson had gone very late one night and he’d become concerned about ending their meetings at a reasonable time. “We’ve got about ten minutes left, so divide up into pairs for dueling. Make sure you use Tarantellegra, the one we learned last week.”

They did as he said, breaking up and spreading out and preparing to duel. He had a one-week-on, one-week-off policy about dueling stances. One meeting using formal rules, the next meeting totally informal, the following back to stances. He wanted them to be comfortable and familiar with formal dueling, but not dependent on it. Hermione had found that changing from week to week had made her more comfortable with dueling altogether, and she didn't experience the hesitation anymore that she'd had in the first few weeks she'd been asked to hex her classmates.

She was one of the first to successfully put down her opponent—Parvati fell with her legs twitching uncontrollably, and as more people were incapacitated, those remaining moved in on each other. Hermione and Ginny were eventually the only girls, while the Weasley twins were trying to fight off the joint effort of Harry and Draco. Dangerous that, she noted, as she and Ginny chose to team up to fight Neville, who was still standing. Harry and Draco finished off the Weasleys and moved on to each other while she and Ginny were still trying to defeat Neville. Hermione went down with a cry, feeling the effects of the Tarantallegra, but Ginny kept fighting. Neville finally took Ginny down as well, and turned to find that Harry and Draco were still fighting. Harry looked calm and collected, as always, but Draco was beginning to sweat and look flushed—by frustration as much as effort, Hermione was sure.

Neville shot a Stunning spell at Draco, who was quick enough to turn and deflect it, but left him wide open for Harry to finish him off. Then Harry and Neville stood there, facing each other, looking grim and tense. The others had started removing the spells from their friends and getting back up, but Hermione just watched the two boys. Would they fight? If they did, who would win?

Finally, Harry stepped forward, making Neville take an involuntary half-step back before seeing that Harry was holding out his empty hand. He reached out and they shook.

"Thanks for the help," Harry said. How did he always sound so cool and diplomatic? Hermione didn't know how he presented such a calm surface, not after she'd seen everything that boiled underneath that surface. But he just smiled and thanked everyone for their hard work

and admonished them once more to work on the new spell. It took them a long time to trickle out of the room; the Defense League had grown. Some of the Ravenclaw boys who had seen the improvement in Cho and Luna's spellwork had pestered them until the girls talked Harry into approaching them about joining the DL. Hannah, Ernie, and Zacharias had brought along a few more of their house, and Padma Patil had been convinced to join her sister in the meetings. Colin Creevey, that boy who had been so fascinated by Harry and kept taking pictures of him, had joined, as well, and brought a few students of his year.

Tonight, there was only one person in the DL who interested her. She cornered him before he could leave, and asked him to stay when the others had gone. There was no better private place to talk than this room. The Room of Requirement was good at keeping secrets.

Harry frowned at her as he stood guard at the door, making sure no one was seen or accosted as they left, quirking his eyebrow to ask her what was going on. She just waved him away. This was between her and Neville. Harry waited until everyone else was gone, but eventually he left, still looking . . . hmm, maybe a bit peeved? Maybe he thought he should already know what she was doing? Well, they might be best friends at this point—maybe even the only real friend that the other one had—but she didn't have to tell him everything, did she?

"What's this about, Hermione?" Neville asked warily when Harry left.

"I just wanted to talk for a couple of minutes, that's all."

"Where no one could find us?" he questioned. Then he sighed. "All right." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, two comfortable chairs were arranged in front of a cosy fireplace against one wall. "There, that's better." He sat down in one of the chairs. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Harry," she said casually.

His eyes bugged. "You mean Harry Potter?"

“I mean the blond boy who just left and is pretending he’s someone else.”

Neville looked a little panicky, and his mouth started opening and closing with no words coming out.

“Don’t worry, he’s the one who told me. He wanted me to know.”

“Oh,” Neville said weakly. “Well, what about him?”

“Oh, nothing about him, exactly. More about him and you. Who the two of you are, to the world and to each other.”

Neville frowned at that, and turned his head away to look into the fire. “I guess that means that you have a better definition for it than I do.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, not really. I just wanted to hear your thoughts.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? I just do.”

“But . . . I guess we’ve been friends for a long time, but—”

“Oh, I see what you mean. Why would I think we were close enough that I could ask?”

“That’s not exactly what I—”

“It’s just that, of all the students in this school, we’re the only two who know. You and I are the only ones he’s told, about who he is and why he’s here. And I’ve seen that you don’t seem to be dealing with it very well, so I was just hoping that, well, I guess I just wanted to be here for you. Because I know things that no one else knows, and you can talk to me. I don’t know if I’m the person you would have picked to talk to, but I’m here.” Hermione knew all too well what it was to be lonely, but she found Neville’s loneliness far more wrenching than her own. She wanted to help him. The way someone had made the effort to help her. Neville needed it.

“What makes you think I need to talk?”

“Because you’ve been holding out on Dumbledore all this time, and you don’t have anyone else besides me, now. I wish you’d talk to the headmaster. I think he loves you, Neville, like you were a part of his own family. We could all see it, way back then. I don’t know what happened, why you don’t go to him anymore. I’m sure you don’t want to tell me, but it’s okay if we don’t talk about that. It can be anything, even just schoolwork. But you need someone, Neville. Someone in your life that you can talk to.”

Neville looked stony and cold. Hermione felt a pang in her heart. She wasn’t getting through to him. Not at all.

“Don’t you?” she asked, half-desperate.

Neville just looked at her for a long time. His eyes were distant. “No, I don’t think so,” he finally said. “Why would I? I’m not the one who has to deal with all this, that’s Harry now. And good luck to him,” Neville added, putting his hands on his knees to push himself up to standing. “I don’t miss it.”

“You don’t miss the stress or the attention,” Hermione countered. “But there is something about it that you do miss, or you wouldn’t resent Harry so much.”

“Look, Hermione, I get it, okay? You two are together now, so you feel like you have to defend him—”

“No, I don’t!” she cried out, standing up to face him. “He can defend himself, if it comes to it, but that’s not why I’m here. And we’re not together, either, so don’t think you can assume so much about my motivations. He’s my friend, and so are you. That’s all there is to this. I’m just trying to be your friend again, like I used to be.”

“You are my friend, Hermione. Doesn’t mean I need to talk.”

She was angry and upset, and very, very sad. Neville was so stubborn, why did he have to be that way? If he kept going like this,

he would break. He could take a lot more than most, but eventually, he would break under the depression and anger he seemed to be swimming in. And people were going to get hurt when that happened. She couldn't see who, or how, but she knew it would be so.

"Why do you have to be such a spoiled child about this, Neville?"

He gave her a bitter smile. "Just making up for lost time," he said, and then he walked out. She couldn't believe it. He just . . . walked out. Was that all that friendship was to him? It meant so little that you could just leave when the other person was so obviously upset and needing something from you? Was that all it had ever been to him, was that all he'd ever been offered? She felt terrible, like she should have been stronger during her own troubles, so that she could be there for him. She'd been so caught up in the strange romance with Viktor, and then with everything that had happened because of it—had she let him down?

No. She remembered. She had been there for him, once upon a time. Helped him with the diary. Ginny had always been able to talk to him, until he pushed her away. He'd been so disappointed by the truth, he hadn't been able to handle it, and he'd pushed them all away. Their friendship had been broken before all the things that had happened to her. Maybe his problem was just that he couldn't remember what friendship was anymore.

Hermione realised she was still standing there, in the empty room, her arms locked over herself, not crying, but having to fight it. She wanted to help Neville, but she didn't know how. Harry was the one she had connected with, the one she had so much in common with, the one that seemed to be her soul mate. She couldn't help that. Neville, as much loyalty as she felt toward him, wasn't a person she really understood. If he was going to get help, he had to learn how to give a little.

The Order was beginning to sit down as the kitchen got too crowded to mill around anymore. Harry had stationed himself in front of the stove, making tea. Kreacher, who was up to his usual insulting tactics, had been banished upstairs rather than allowed to serve the guests. Sirius didn't like Kreacher overhearing the Order's plans, anyway.

Harry didn't really see why, since no matter how much Kreacher hated his master, he couldn't disobey the direct order to keep his mouth shut and stay in the house.

Harry didn't mind making the tea, but his real reason for staying by the stove was to stay out of the way. He still didn't like the attention. He didn't know what they expected from him. He was just a kid, what was he supposed to be able to do against Voldemort? The DL, hard as they worked, was nothing but a joke. They could probably win a fight against their own classmates, and some of them could probably even hold their own with a Death Eater for a few minutes, but none of them could go up against Voldemort any more than Harry could. And yet . . . all these people, working to combat Voldemort and his influence, they were looking to him. He was becoming some kind of symbol. Just like he was a symbol for Voldemort of everything hateful, he was a symbol for the Order of everything hopeful. And that was the last thing Harry had wanted. He didn't want to be a symbol.

But still, he paid strict attention during the meeting. Snape was giving a report. He'd started looking very ragged. He probably hadn't gotten a full night's sleep all year, but it didn't show in his attitude or the way he spoke. Harry didn't know why he would never just admit that he was tired, it wasn't like they wouldn't understand. But that wasn't totally true, Harry did know well enough. Snape wasn't the only one in the room with too much pride to show his weaknesses.

"He talks of nothing but the prophecy, now," Snape was saying. He stood stiff as a board. He didn't like the attention, either. "It is time to do as we have discussed and use two guards nightly. I will not inform him of the change. It should not be hard to make him believe that I did not know, once he discovers it, since I am not one of the guards. But everyone in this room ought to be prepared to get to the Ministry at a moment's notice from now on. It will not be long before he makes his attempt."

Dumbledore was here for the meeting today, and he nodded as Snape took his seat. "I have already asked Alastor to create a new schedule using pairs of guards, we shall implement it at once."

"I think we've all been ready to get there in a minute ever since Christmas," Remus spoke up.

Arthur chuckled and said, "I know I have been." His wife squeezed his hand.

Then Shacklebolt cleared his throat. Attention turned his way, but he looked very uncomfortable. "I would like some more information about this prophecy. I am not saying that I do not understand its importance, but I think it may be time that we all were told what it really says." He was looking at Dumbledore. "You have told us that it concerns Potter's place in the fight against You-Know-Who—"

Yep, still cracks me up to hear grown men as dignified as Kingsley Shacklebolt use that name.

"—but we are risking our lives to keep him from getting this information. I know that you are worried one of us might be captured, Dumbledore, but . . ." He spread out his hands in a questioning gesture. "But we are risking our lives." He looked over to Harry, who froze. "For his safety. I have been told that his safety is paramount, but I need to know why that is."

Dumbledore looked at Harry, as well. For a long time. Harry felt caught in a trap. No, worse than that, caught in a vise until he couldn't breathe. He hated this, he hated all of this. Why couldn't he just go back to being a boy who had no clue who he was, what he was?

He stood up. "If you're waiting for permission, headmaster, you're not getting it from me. But I know you're going to tell them, anyway. Just do me a favour and let me leave first. I don't need to be here, you know my feelings on the paramount importance of my safety."

"But we don't," Tonks drawled, pretending to be casual to calm Harry down.

"You want the truth?" Harry began.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore said with concern.

"If you're going to tell them the truth, then so am I," Harry said with a conjured dignity. "I am all for keeping this prophecy away from Voldemort," he addressed the room. "It'll only make things worse if he hears it. But I don't want any of you risking your lives for me. I don't think I'm any more important than you are. I think that if I get into a fight, I'd better be ready to hold my own. The only time I want someone going out of their way for me is if we're in a battle and I've got your back, too. I'm sure Dumbledore will convince you differently, but at least now you know how I feel about it."

Harry left the kitchen. He went up to his room. He wished he could go back to school, but Sirius wouldn't allow him to travel unless he or Remus was with Harry. Harry might have been doing a lot of things wrong, but he wasn't yet disobedient to his godfather, at least he could say that much. He knew Sirius wouldn't be up here to escort him back until he'd made sure of things in the kitchen. He was going to protect Harry's interests down there, while Harry was sitting up here sulking like a little kid. Harry started to feel really stupid. That little outburst had made him look like an idiot. He'd be lucky if they took a word he'd said seriously. But that's what Sirius would be doing, making sure they knew that Harry had meant what he said, even if he didn't agree completely. Sirius didn't believe this prophecy, either, but he certainly wasn't trying to stop them from protecting Harry.

Sirius didn't come for almost twenty minutes. By then, Harry had had quite enough of himself and was ready to apologise. He took one look at his godfather's face and winced.

"Made a mess of things, did I?"

"Dumbledore will be up in a minute to talk to you."

"Oh."

"You know how I witnessed that vow between you and Malfoy, and I said no questions asked, because I trust you? Remember that?"

"Yes," Harry muttered. "You can trust me, no one but Malfoy even knows that you were there. He's totally jealous now, by the way. Won't say it, but I know he wishes his dad was as wicked as mine."

“Nice flattery, very strategic. But another stunt like that, and I start asking questions. You hear me?”

Harry stood up and went to Sirius, knowing that Sirius wouldn't even ask what he needed, he'd already know that Harry just needed the assurance of a hug. “Don't need to. I was already sorry. I feel stupid.”

“Don't worry,” Sirius said, patting his back, “I sorted it out for you.”

“I thought you would.” Harry couldn't let go of him for a minute, grateful beyond words for the man in front of him, thinking about how easily it could have been different. How easily Sirius might have decided it was impossible to escape, gotten caught, gone after Peter instead . . . Harry might never have met him, but whatever powers that be had allowed it happen this way. Sirius was the father he'd pictured himself having when he'd allowed himself to picture one at all. His only regret was that he'd never know what his real father might have done differently, or if he'd be the same, or if his Uncle Sirius would have been over at their house twice a week for dinner and been just as great an influence as he was now.

Sirius pushed him back and ruffled his hair, then frowned. “We've got to dye that tonight before you go.”

Harry nodded. “I'll come find you after I talk to Dumbledore.”

“I'm glad I won't have to lock you in to convince you to hear me,” the familiar old voice said from the doorway.

It was on the tip of Harry's tongue to ask how long Dumbledore had been standing there, but he knew better. Dumbledore would never eavesdrop.

“See you in a bit,” Sirius said, giving his shoulder an encouraging squeeze on his way out.

Harry looked around his very Spartan room—a bed, a few clothes, and a nearly-empty desk—and gestured to the desk chair. “Uh, you

can sit down.” Maybe I should go ahead and do something with the place over the summer . . .

Dumbledore glanced at the chair, then smiled and conjured his own, a comfortable little armchair that he placed in front of the bed, where Harry was sitting.

“When you get old, you learn to appreciate the little things,” he said.

Harry offered a brief smile before he said, “Sir, is this wise? I thought, well, you were keeping your distance from me.”

“I have spoken to Severus. He says you are much improved, but we both know that if Voldemort was truly determined, you would probably not be able to keep him out despite your preparation. While I have asked him to give you a few additional lessons, as insurance, if you will, I would like to risk it tonight.”

“Because of what happened downstairs? I apologise, sir. I was just . . .”

“Feeling overwhelmed?”

“Yeah.”

“I know that you are under a great burden, Harry, no one could deny that. and I am not here to try to convince you to see things the way I see them. You and I have already agreed that we will not concern ourselves with that so long as our goals remain the same.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, unable to help himself. He’d been afraid this was going to be another “prophecy does have power, Harry,” discussion.

Dumbledore gave him a twinkling smile. “My concern is not for the issues, but for you, my boy. I have become aware of certain things that I must ask you about.”

“Oh. All right.”

“When Hobs the house elf appeared in my office several months ago asking for permission to assist you, I gave that permission freely. I was not by any means certain, but I guessed what you were looking for. I have been staying back, but I find myself needing reassurance that you have taken precautions with your young pupils, to protect them from both recrimination and from any overconfidence they might have as a result of the instruction.”

Shouldn't be surprised, I never give him enough credit. The man is sharp!

“Of course, sir. They have all agreed and signed their name to secrecy. And I don't think we've reached the point of overconfidence yet, most of us are still tripping over our own feet.”

Dumbledore smiled at that, and said, “I am sure that you are an admirable teacher, Harry. I will not ask you which students are involved, not yet. I do not think that is information I would like to have. But it is not the only thing that concerns me. I know that you spoke to Neville some time ago.” He sighed. “I would have liked to be the one to have that conversation, but I understood why you felt you must. I was certain that Neville was the only student who was aware of your identity. But based upon the closeness you seem to share with Miss Granger, I must ask—”

“She knows.”

“Ah. I see.”

“I just told her a couple of weeks ago.”

“Do you think this was a wise decision, Harry?”

“I do,” Harry said, meeting the headmaster's eyes directly. “She has been an invaluable member of my, uh, study group, and an invaluable friend. She's become very committed to the fight against Voldemort, and I honestly think she needed to know. I think she'd like to be part of the Order, if she could. But I haven't told her much about the Order, sir, I promise.”

"I understand, Harry. It is too late for me to talk you out of it, and I am not sure that I would. I think it may be good for you to have someone to confide in, if you are sure of the person you have chosen."

"I am."

"Then let us move on."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You seem like you're going through a list of things you need to talk to me about, but they're all kind of the same, aren't they?"

"Whatever do you mean, my boy?"

"I mean that you're worried I'm not really with you. That I'm going my own way and ignoring you and that it's going to undermine what you're trying to do with the Order."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, surprisingly enough. "You have found me out, Harry. Yes, it's true, I am concerned. I worry that my decision to distance myself from you, for your protection, is creating a rift between our goals." He smiled. "Honesty is quite a good virtue, is it not?"

Harry laughed. "And now you've found me out, sir."

"In the last few weeks, you have gotten several detentions with Delores Umbridge, and I think that you are trying to provoke her, and by extension, the Ministry. I also see that you are distancing yourself from the Order, from those who are allied with you."

And there Dumbledore paused, just looking at Harry. Waiting for that inherent honesty that lived in him despite the falsehoods he was forced to hide behind. He didn't have to hide, here in this room with this man. He might not agree with Dumbledore, but he couldn't deny that they were on the same side, nor that Dumbledore truly cared

about him as a person, not just as a symbol. He would like to have done, but he couldn't.

He dropped his head. "I don't want to be a prophesied saviour. I just want to be a student at your school. I like Quidditch, and going to class, and hanging out with my mates at the school. Teaching the others is a necessity, since Sirius can't do it, but I wish it wasn't me. I just want . . ." He sighed.

"To be Evan Rivers," Dumbledore finished softly.

Harry blinked rapidly. "Yeah."

"I understand, Harry, and I sympathise. But I must encourage you to put these wishes aside. They are not helping you. I think that it is your desire to be the person you have invented that is causing you to distance yourself from those who wish to help you. I think that without truly realising it, you are moving away from us so that you do not have to be who you really are."

Harry was startled by that. Was Dumbledore right? Was his anger at the Order, his anger at Dumbledore, his anger at Voldemort, really so simple as that? Not disgust at the reliance on prophecy, but an unconscious anger that they were forcing him to be Harry Potter? He chewed viciously on his lip, trying to think. It was possible that all his emotional turmoil was nothing more than this. Some childish wish to be someone else, like when he was eight years old and he and his classmates all wanted to be the secret son of Superman or a rock star.

He looked at Dumbledore. The man had been fighting his whole life, against terrible foes. Grindelwald first, and this war with Voldemort had been going on for twenty years, at least. He had to be getting tired. It was no wonder he placed such hope in Harry, even if Harry thought it was misplaced. And maybe he was right, at least about this part of it. Maybe it was time Harry stopped wishing he could be someone else, and just tried to be who he was.

"Harry, let me say one more thing. Even were you able to be Evan Rivers, you would still be in danger from Voldemort. You cannot push

your allies away, no matter who you are. If you try to stand alone, you will fall. It is a truth that has not changed since long before you or I were born.”

Harry hadn’t been feeling alone. He had Sirius, and he had Hermione. But that was him trying to be Evan Rivers. If all Harry Potter had was Sirius and Hermione, then he was doomed.

“Sir, I . . .” He didn’t know what to say. “I need some time to sort this out. I’m sorry.”

“I understand, Harry.”

Dumbledore stood up, and the chair vanished.

“Sir? I’ll try. To stop alienating myself, I mean. I will.”

“That’s wonderful,” Dumbledore said with all sincerity.

“But sir, I’ve always been like this. I’ve always been very private. I’ve never had anyone thinking I was important, looking to me for anything. I don’t really know how to do this. I’m not going to do it very well.”

“I will not expect you to master it immediately,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Like any form of magic, learning to work together with people who care about you can take time.”

“Care about me?” Harry said skeptically.

“Of course, Harry.” This was the first time Dumbledore had looked so entirely serious throughout the whole conversation. “You don’t think so? They only just tonight learned what makes you so important, but they’ve all known for some time that you are special. You are a gifted and caring person, Harry, with as much determination as any of us to see Voldemort defeated and the world a better place. We didn’t need a prophecy to tell us that.”

Harry nearly glowed. That. That right there, that was what he wanted. Not to be looked up to as a prophesied hero, but to be seen for what he was. For people to see him putting all his considerable

determination and training into the right cause and to know that he was just trying to do his part for their side. "Thank you, sir."

"I hope you can see that we are on your side."

"No, sir. It's me who's on yours. You were fighting long before I was. And I want to be part of it, I really do." He shrugged. "But I might need to be reminded of that once in a while."

"Good!" Harry cried. "Again!"

Ron was facing his sister, and neither of them was winning. Harry was proud of how far Ron and Ginny had both come this year, as siblings as well as fighters. At the beginning of this, Ginny would have been trying to humiliate Ron and Ron would have been letting her. Today, they were panting with effort but grinning with the thrill. Ginny leaving the Quidditch team and Ron getting on it might have been the best thing that could have happened to them, however shocking it might have been in the beginning.

"Stupefy!" Ginny shouted, but Ron was too quick.

"Expelliarmus!" he cried, and snatched her wand.

The twins, who had been beating every opponent they'd been put up against, were standing off to the side, watching, and Fred lifted his wand with a grin to shoot a hex at Ginny while she was defenseless. Something relatively harmless, just to show off, Harry was sure. He stayed out of the way, waiting to see how Ginny would defend herself.

Fred shot off his spell without saying a word—the older students, who already had a bit of experience with non-verbal, were getting pretty good at it—but nothing happened. It bounced off a shield and shot harmlessly to the ceiling. Harry turned his eyes back to Ron, who stood there with his wand outstretched, holding a protective spell around his sister. A non-verbal protective spell.

"Beautiful!" Harry declared, clapping Ron on the back. Ron grinned, and got a few slaps on the back from Seamus and Dean when Harry moved away to help sort out a little mess involving Cho, Luna, and

Cho's nosebleed. OWLs and NEWTs were only a week away, and the stress level was getting to everyone in the DL, even those who weren't preparing for the exams. He wanted to be sure Cho was all right, but some angry words caught his ear. He veered off, reasoning that Terry Boot was decently skilled and could fix a minor injury to his housemate.

It was Draco and Neville. Ever since last summer, when they no longer had to pretend to get along . . . well, Draco was irksome, no doubt about that. And Neville had far less patience than Harry had for him.

"You don't have any call to say things like that," Neville said furiously.

Hermione stood to the side, her cheeks pink with anger and embarrassment. Harry felt his heart sinking. What had Draco said? But Draco was looking a little pink as well, wasn't he? Harry looked closer, and suddenly grinned. The pink on his cheek wasn't from blushing, it was from being slapped. Hermione had already defended herself.

"I have a right to say whatever I like," Draco said, somehow looking down his nose at the taller boy.

Harry didn't like where this was going, and stepped in. "Not exactly, Draco," he said, low enough that only Draco could hear him. "Or you wouldn't even be here."

"Stay out of this, Rivers," Neville demanded.

"Yes, would you?" Draco drawled. "This is just between me and the other Boy-Who-Lived."

Neville suddenly blanched, but it made Harry see red. He actually had his wand up to hex Draco before he reined in his temper enough to simply speak rather than curse.

"There is no call for that, Draco. I have been good enough to let you practise with us and improve your combat skills, and you ought to have more respect for me, if not for him—"

"I can speak for myself," Neville ground out between clenched teeth.

"Then please do!" Harry snapped, giving him a furious look. "You're finally tired of moping, are you?"

Neville raised his wand, and Harry instantly raised a shield, but Neville fired his curse at Draco, not Harry. Draco fired back, and quite suddenly the two were dueling. Harry backed up quickly, and found himself impressed. They were both getting quite good. Apparently these lessons were worth something. When it went on for a couple of minutes without a victor, Harry spoke up again.

"Are you two quite finished with your temper tantrum?"

Time seemed to jump. One second Harry was drawling out a sarcastic comment. The next, he was laying on the floor with Hermione leaning over him asking if he was okay, sharp pain spreading across his chest from a really powerful Stinging Hex. He leaped to his feet, his patience utterly destroyed.

"Get out. Both of you, get out."

Neville and Draco were both standing there looking mulish. At least they're not dueling anymore.

"I told you to stay out of it," Neville muttered.

"Who do you think you are, Evan?" Draco sneered.

That almost made Harry laugh, but he was far too annoyed. "As long as we're in this room, I'm your teacher, that's who I am. And whatever rivalry you have, you leave it at the door. We're here to learn how to fight, and we're supposed to be learning that so we can fight with each other." He stared at Neville. "We're supposed to be working together, here. Or do you honestly think that knowing how to Stun someone means you can go out and take on a bunch of Death Eaters by yourself?"

"I, for one," Draco said, "am not going out to fight at all, so—"

“Shut up and get out. Now. That’s both of you.”

They did. Harry watched them go to be sure they wouldn’t just start up again out in the hall, but they took opposite directions. Everyone was staring at Harry when he turned back to face the room.

“Way to tell them, Evan,” Cho said, still cleaning the blood off her face.

“Does this mean we can’t all be friends now?” George cracked, making a few people giggle.

Harry shook his head and sighed. “I assume the rest of you lot know why we’re here? I’m not in the mood to have to kick anyone else out tonight.”

Hermione was at his side, laying her hand on his arm. “Yes. We know what this is about. Don’t we?” she asked, raising her voice. There were murmurs of assent. “We’re ready to get back to work.”

Harry squared his shoulders. “Sorry that had to happen. Let’s get back to it. Ron, that was excellent, but Ernie, you missed a great opportunity . . .”

Chapter Twenty-One

Albus paced across his office, back and forth. Fawkes flitted from perch to perch, following him out of concern, and the soft trilling noise Fawkes made from time to time was the greatest comfort he could find these days. It was all coming to a head, and it was going to be soon. Tom would not wait much longer before he moved against them—as invaluable as Severus was, Albus did not need him to see that. Then there was the contention with Cornelius and the situation it had created here at Hogwarts with Delores Umbridge. Albus could see that Harry was near his breaking point with her cruelty. The public was getting restless, wanting answers . . . It would all come together with one almighty crash, soon.

There was only one way he could see out of it. Solidarity. A unified front. One story to tell, one set of answers. But that would require so many things. Cornelius would have to admit that his worst fears were being realised. If Tom was going to push a confrontation with Harry, Harry had to survive it. And then they had to agree to work together to present themselves as a cohesive whole before wizarding society. Himself, Cornelius, and Harry Potter. Would it do to remind them all of Neville, about whom they seemed to have forgotten? By rights he ought to be part of that cohesion, but it might be too much to ask of the boy.

He sighed. Fawkes hooted sympathetically. And someone knocked on his door.

He stopped brooding immediately. Whoever was at his door had problems of their own, hopefully problems he could solve, and they deserved his full attention. All of the professors counted on him as he did on them, and it could only be one of them who knew the password to come upstairs. He cast a revealing spell that told him who was on the other side of his door, and was too surprised for a moment to open the door and admit him. He caught a breath. For a moment, he almost dared to hope . . . but no, it had been too long now. Whatever purpose was behind this visit, it couldn't be what he wanted it to be.

Resigned to that, he opened the door. "Good evening, Neville."

Neville stood outside of a door that had seen people come and go for centuries, throughout lifetimes of war and peace, and he wondered as he knocked—did this door care who put a hand to it? Had it ever taken an interest in the wizards who had passed through here? Had it seen him come and go, and wondered if he was as remarkable as the man who occupied the office said he was?

That was stupid. No door, not even a door at a magical school, was capable of caring about the people who used it. But no matter. This night felt momentous whether it went recognised by anyone or not.

The door that was the subject of his ruminations opened, and the man he had come to see stood there, holding it wide.

“Good evening, Neville.”

“Hello, sir,” he answered.

“Come in, my boy,” Dumbledore said, stepping aside to admit him. “What brings you to my office this evening?”

That question made it clear to Neville that he really was as big of an idiot as Harry and Hermione seemed to think. There’d been a time when Dumbledore didn’t have to ask if there was a purpose. Neville had come to him all the time when he was younger, for any number of reasons, simply because he knew Dumbledore cared. It was like having a grandfather as well as having Gran, and he’d told the school headmaster things that he didn’t tell his own friends. Now . . . now he needed a reason to be here.

“I need to talk to you.” To confess . . . “Well, to say some things.”

“Of course. You are always welcome to come here, whenever something is on your mind. That will never change. Please, sit down.”

Neville did, but he knew Dumbledore could see how agitated he was. He had not come here to do anything easy, and his fidgeting hands and feet told the story. But Dumbledore looked as patient as ever. Even when he was overrun with problems, there was always time for

Neville. With the way things had been lately, Neville had stopped taking that for granted, and appreciated it now. It helped him begin.

“It’s . . . well, I guess I should start with Harry.” Well, after all, didn’t everything start with that boy? This whole sorry mess had started because he’d disappeared, or if you wanted to go back that far, because he’d been born. That was hardly a fair way to look at it, Neville knew, but the fact remained that he wouldn’t be here right now if not for Harry.

Dumbledore didn’t say anything, just looked at him attentively. It almost made Neville smile, but his feelings of guilt wouldn’t allow it. It was the most valuable lesson he’d ever learn, Dumbledore had declared, if Neville would learn to copy this practice. If you weren’t sure what to say, you kept your gob shut. It made you look less of a fool, and had the added benefit of making people talk just to fill the uncomfortable silence. You could get a lot of information that way. It was second nature to Dumbledore now, Neville knew, but he also didn’t need the man to wait him out. He was here because he wanted to talk.

“He talked to me earlier this year, as I’m sure you know, because he thought I should know who he was, that he’d come back. And we talked about the prophecy. About what he thought about it. Did you know, sir, that he doesn’t believe in it?”

Neville wasn’t too certain what Harry and Dumbledore had spoken of or not spoken of. He thought it would be good to establish that first.

“Yes, I know,” he said calmly.

That made things easier. “Well, back when he first said all that, it made me really angry. That he could be so casual about it, when it had taken up so much of my life.” He still wasn’t entirely over that anger, if he were being honest, but keeping on in spite of it was really the only option at this point.

“If you are worried that it is not a real prophecy, I can—”

“No, sir, that’s not it.” But it did bring up another thing he needed to say. “I mean, I have been doing a lot of thinking about it, and I’m not very sure about prophecy right now. I have a lot of doubts that I’m trying to work out, but that’s not really what I was trying to say. All I was trying to say was that he made me angry, and, well, jealous. And so I didn’t think about what he was really saying to me. I’ve been acting . . .” Neville fidgeted in his chair. Dumbledore did not interrupt, but it wasn’t strategy now—this was him showing Neville that he cared about what he had to say enough to wait. “Childish,” Neville said at last, letting the shame he felt creep into his voice, not holding back the way he was feeling. “I’ve been treating what I thought I was, what Harry is, like a prize that’s been stolen from me. I knew in my head, a long time ago, that it wasn’t any prize, nothing anyone should really want, but—well. I never really wanted it, anyway. I just didn’t want anyone else to have it, either. I was so disappointed when we found Peter Pettigrew. I was so bitter. I thought my life was such a joke, I . . .”

When Neville broke off, upset and lost, Dumbledore finally spoke up.

“I understand, Neville. Better than you think. You have not come to me, but that does not mean I did not still care about you. I have seen what you’ve put yourself through.” He did not make any attempt to hide his compassion.

Neville looked down into his lap. “And you don’t think I’m an idiot?”

Dumbledore just smiled, like Neville was still his favourite grandson. “No, I do not. I think that what I asked of you when you were young has made your life more difficult than it needed to be.”

Neville shook his head. It wasn’t what Dumbledore had done that had gotten them to this point, much as he wanted it to be. Nor was it Harry’s fault that they were in this position at all—he’d been eight years old, he hadn’t known that trying to escape this trap was going to put someone else in it. It wasn’t the situation with prophecy that had Neville here, trying to explain that he was ashamed of himself. It was the way he’d handled it.

"I tried to blame you for it. I wanted to. But like I said, I had to start this talk with Harry. Because he's what made me see myself for what I really am. A petulant little brat. What he said to me, what I wouldn't let myself think about . . . I'm finally thinking about it. Hermione Granger tried to offer her friendship to me again, after all this time, and I turned her away. I still can't believe I did that. I guess I just wanted to keep my bitterness to myself, thought she had enough to deal with." The look on her face when he'd walked away had been haunting him ever since. Really, that had been the final straw, but Neville was so stubborn that he'd needed two final straws. "Then I got in a fight with Draco Malfoy, and Harry kicked us out of—well, I guess you know about the DL. Anyway, he kicked us out and told us to grow up."

Dumbledore looked a little angry at that. "I have always felt your problem was that you had grown up far too quickly," he said, but Neville shook his head, letting the headmaster know that he wasn't quite finished.

"All this week, I've been doing nothing but thinking about what he said, all that time ago when he told me who he was. And he was right. If I made my life about fighting You-Know-Who, if that's what I thought I was destined for, then there's no reason to change that. I don't need a prophecy to know what's right and what's wrong and what I ought to stand for. Harry doesn't even believe in prophecy, he's just here to keep his loved ones safe. If I'm in this fight only because of prophecy, not because I believe in this cause, then I'm . . ." Neville trailed off. He'd finally realized what Harry had been trying to tell him, and it hurt him that he'd never seen it for himself. He'd been so selfish, so spoiled, all this time. If he was on their side just because he wanted to be important, then he was no better than Voldemort. "If Harry doesn't see himself as anything more than another soldier, then I have no right to see myself any different."

Dumbledore just looked at him for a long time, but Neville was done. He'd admitted to his guilt, and he'd told him of his change in heart. He was holding his breath, waiting for what Dumbledore would think of all this.

“Tell me, Neville, what does this change in your thinking mean for you? What will you do differently?”

There was the Dumbledore he knew. Neville’s heart leaped with joy. This was just the way things had always been.

“For starters, I’ll stop acting like I’m anything special. I’m through with licking my wounds, and I’m ready to get to work. I want to be a part of this fight—because it’s the right thing to do. Not for any other reason than because I want to keep our world safe, because I want to stop what’s happening. But before I can do that, I have a lot of apologies to make. To the people I used to be friends with, especially Hermione, and to Harry for a couple of reasons. But first . . .” Neville had learned his lessons well. If it was important, you committed to it. You didn’t flinch, you didn’t blush. So he looked at Dumbledore directly and bared himself for the man he’d once loved like family. “First to you. I’m sorry, sir. I’ve let you down badly. No matter what, prophecy or not, you taught me better than that. I was angry with you, and I wanted to disappoint you, but you didn’t deserve it. So I’m sorry. Sorry that I’ve ignored you, and that I gave up. I’m back now. If you want me to be.”

Dumbledore had steepled his hands on his desk so that he looked very steady, but he couldn’t hide that his eyes, behind his glasses, were getting wet. Neville wasn’t sure what he was waiting for now, but maybe he didn’t fully understand what Neville was saying, so Neville thought he’d better clarify.

“I missed you, sir.”

And he completed his act of bravery, even though he was shaky with anxiety that his gesture would be dismissed, that all of this had been for nothing . . . He stood up, came around the desk, and simply stood there in front of the headmaster, hoping that it wasn’t too late.

“I’ve missed coming to you whenever I need something, and sometimes just to tell you about my day. I’ve even missed the lessons you used to give me. I know it’s my fault, I’m the one who wasn’t there, but even when I was staying away, I missed this.”

Dumbledore stood up as well, and put a careful hand on his shoulder. "So have I, my boy. So have I." His hand gripped Neville's shoulder painfully tight. "At the risk of sounding repetitive, I will say again that my door is always open to you. It always has been and always will be."

Neville felt tears in his own eyes now. "I know that, sir. Will you forgive me for not remembering that?"

"Of course, my boy. Of course."

The past two years fell away, and Neville was absolved.

Harry waited impatiently in Sirius' office. He needed advice. Hermione still hadn't been able to cast a corporeal Patronus, and Harry wanted to know what to do to help her. Sirius, if anyone, would know how to fight past bad memories and find something strong enough to conjure a full-bodied creature. Harry himself used his memories of the day they had moved into that trailer in White Valley, the day he'd known for sure that he and Sirius were going to be a family (and his Patronus, which took the form of a stag, was just a reminder that he had a lot of family that loved him, not just Sirius), but Hermione didn't have anything that staggeringly happy in her memory. The day she'd got her Hogwarts letter was probably happy enough, but too faint in her mind.

Harry knew what the problem was, just not how to fix it. The happiest she'd been, when she was getting attention from a boy and felt like a pretty, powerful witch, was tainted by what he'd done to her later. She'd let Harry poke around in her mind a very little bit, and it seemed like everything was tainted with that. She kept on, she worked hard, and it was obvious that some of that spiritual gunk was starting to slough off, but it was there, and it made it very hard to cast a Patronus. Sirius, who had enough spiritual gunk for six people, managed to cast a silvery version of his own Animagus form, Harry had seen it. How did he do it? Weren't all his happy memories tainted with the sight of the house in Godric's Hollow in ruins, his friends laying dead, knowing that Pettigrew had betrayed them?

Harry knew Sirius could help, if he'd just get here. He'd gone to an Order meeting, but he'd said he was coming back to the school to grade some essays. This was either the longest Order meeting of all time, or Sirius had, for some reason, decided not to come back. Harry shifted in his chair restlessly.

The blinding pain smacked into him so hard and so unexpectedly that he fell out of the chair. It was agony. It was like it had been with Arthur, no, it was worse than it had been with Arthur, and his vision was going black, being stolen away . . .

Sirius. Sirius, on duty at the Department of Mysteries. Patrolling the corridor. Someone else would be nearby, they were pulling double duty now, but Harry didn't see the other person. He tried to fight this, he knew that Sirius wasn't on guard duty tonight, he knew that, but he kept seeing it. Seeing everything, as the man with the snakey nose and the long fingers stepped from the shadows in front of his godfather.

"Good evening, Black," he said in a silky voice.

His godfather gripped his wand and leveled it on the other wizard. "What are you doing here? Are you mad?"

"Why, Black, it is obvious what I am doing here, is it not? I am taking the prophecy, and I am hurting you."

"That's what you think. Stupefy!"

The jet of red light went caroming off harmlessly, and Voldemort laughed.

"You thought it would be so easy? You insult me. Crucio!"

Sirius didn't make a sound, but he fell to his knees with his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth gritted. When Voldemort stopped, he looked up at him, beads of sweat on his forehead, and said, "You won't get a scream out of me, you slimy bastard."

"I do not need you to scream," Voldemort said with a little smile. "I need you to writhe in pain until your godson is sufficiently convinced to join us."

"What? Harry? Why?"

"So I can kill him, of course. But I am hoping to hear the prophecy before he arrives. You never know, there may be a certain way I must kill him." He said it all with a gleeful sort of madness. He looked up from Sirius, and somehow he was looking into Harry's eyes. "Will you not come to Black's rescue, Potter? Will you not spare him this pain?" Still looking at Harry, he began to torture Sirius again. Sirius still refused to scream, but he fell to the floor, twisting, trying to escape, biting straight through his tongue so that brilliant red blood spilled over his chin and streaked his face. Tears streamed from his closed eyes. "Or will you simply watch?"

Desperate to escape those gleaming mad eyes, Harry finally managed to slam a barrier into place. He came to himself, laying on the cold stone floor, panting and shaking and soaked with sweat. His head throbbed madly, and he couldn't really move past the pain and the shock. Voldemort had got in, the bastard, and not in a small way. He'd figured it out. He'd figured out the connection, damn him forever, and how to use it. Harry briefly wondered how. Had Voldemort, too, experienced moments of strange, inappropriate emotion? Had he been recruiting a Death Eater, and suddenly found himself in a neck-and-neck race for the Golden Snitch with a pretty Asian girl?

It hardly mattered how he'd done, the fact remained that he had. Harry had to get to the bottom of the vision that had been forced on him, and fast. He went immediately to the fireplace in the office and called home.

"Sirius!" he shouted from the fireplace, not bothering with the more secret-friendly "Dad." No time for pretense, not now. "Sirius, where are you? Sirius! Hey, hello? Remus! Remus, are you there? Remus, where's Sirius? If you two volunteered for duty tonight, I'll kill you myself! Hello?"

Only one figure approached the fire, and it definitely wasn't anyone Harry was looking for. It was a small, crabbed creature with cold smirk on his obnoxious face.

"Kreacher, where is Sirius?"

"Master is not here."

"Then where is he?"

"He does not tell poor Kreacher, oh no, Kreacher has been abandoned . . ."

"Kreacher, your master commanded you to obey me. So you will tell me where he is, and you will do it right now."

"Kreacher lives to serve, of course he does, but Kreacher knows nothing, Kreacher cannot say."

"When did he leave, then?"

"It has been most of an hour, it has, that Kreacher has been all alone here, Master and the nasty werewolf have gone away. It was very important, yes, they said important, and they might not return at all until the morning, leaving poor Kreacher all alone . . ."

"Kreacher, when I find the time to deal with it, I'm giving you clothes," Harry vowed, then yanked his head out of the fireplace, letting Kreacher ramble to himself. Sirius wasn't home, he and Remus had gone somewhere important, possibly all night. Well, there was only one way to find out if guard duty had been changed. Dumbledore would know. Harry jumped up and headed for Dumbledore's office.

He met Neville on the way down. He and Neville had not spoken since he'd been forced to kick Neville and Draco out of the last DL meeting. Not even to study together for OWLs, which were set to begin in the morning, and wasn't this a fine night for all this to take place—

"Harry!"

“Make it quick, Neville.”

“Are you going to see Dumbledore?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not there. I was just looking for him, too, but he didn’t come back from the Order meeting. McGonagall says he was called away, I guess the Minister needed to see him or something.”

“Well, shit,” Harry said viciously, stopping in his tracks. What to do now?

“Um, while we’re waiting for him to get back, can I talk to you?” Harry’s distraction must have implied consent, because Neville continued. “I need to apologise to you, but maybe we’d better do it in private—”

“I appreciate the thought, Neville, but I don’t have time for privacy or apologies right now. Voldemort got into my head just now.”

Neville stopped in his tracks. “What happened?”

“Made me see a vision of him attacking Sirius while he was on duty at the Department of Mysteries, guarding the prophecy. I think he’s waiting for me there, wants me to come running to Sirius’ rescue.”

Neville went pale. “Harry, if he’s got Sirius . . .”

“He doesn’t,” Harry said shortly. “Sirius wasn’t supposed to be there tonight, and he’s not an idiot. I thought Dumbledore would know where he was, but there goes that idea.” He chewed his lip, and started rubbing the thick web of half-healed scars on the back of his hand. He’d been doing that when he was nervous, lately. “Neville, I’m certain that Sirius isn’t there, but I’m nearly as certain that Voldemort is. He’s actually waiting for me there. And he’s going to get his hands on that prophecy, and he’s going to find out the whole truth of it, which is something I really don’t want him to do, and all the people who would be of any use have simply vanished!”

“What do you want to do?” Neville asked grimly.

“Find somebody in the Order, for starters. We’ll use the fire in Sirius’ office, I know how to call the Weasleys. Not my first choice, but the only ones I know how to contact, and I’m sure they can get in touch with the others . . .”

They ran. Harry threw himself to his knees, grabbed the powder, then he heard Neville cry out and felt himself being hauled back up by a hand on his collar.

“Hey! What in bleeding— oh, not you,” Harry said in dismay.

Umbridge stood there in a glaring pink set of robes, an evil little smile on her evil little face. “Mr. Rivers, I think you know that there is a rule about this. Students are not to be using the Floo network without the permission and supervision of a professor or myself. You are breaking this rule, which tells me that you have not yet learned the lesson I have been trying to teach you with all the detentions I have been forced to give you.”

While all the flourishes Harry so spitefully added to his letters made it hard to distinguish, the phrase “I will respect authority” was clearly visible to those who knew what they were looking at. Oh, Harry had learned his lesson, all right.

“Inquisitor,” he ground out, thinking that Dumbledore’s peculiar method of politeness and patience might be the route to go with her, “I understand that the rules must be upheld, in normal circumstances. But this is not a normal circumstance, and—”

With shock, Harry realised he was simply mouthing without any sound coming out. She’d cast *Silencio* on him! How dare she?

“Mr. Rivers, I am familiar with your particular way of twisting the truth and attempting to justify your rule-breaking. I do not wish to hear it again. In fact, I am nearly certain that you were going to use this fireplace to spread more of your nasty lies, weren’t you? So you may

keep your nonsense to yourself, and go directly to your dormitory. I will see you tomorrow night in my office for detention.”

“You know what? I think I hate you,” Harry said, and was surprised by how cheerful his voice sounded. “I actually have another errand to run, so I’m afraid I can’t go to my dormitory just yet. I need to speak to Professor Snape.”

It would have been vastly more intelligent to go to him instead of wasting time trying to call the Weasleys, but Harry had nearly forgotten about him. He wasn’t exactly reliably here, lately, anyway. He was with Voldemort pretty often.

Umbridge looked nearly apoplectic. “How dare you speak to me that way? Very well, Mr. Rivers, I will send for Professor Snape. Anything you have to say can be said right here, in front of me.”

Harry wished that looks could kill. She’d have been flayed into small pieces by now. “Fine.”

He stood there, arms crossed, fuming, while Umbridge sent Neville off to get Snape. He had a moment to think, at last, and what he thought about was Neville. Neville had started to apologise. He’d been coming back from Dumbledore’s office. Did that mean Neville had finally made up his mind? But his mind quickly went back to Sirius, and Voldemort. He was sure Voldemort had not, in fact, captured Sirius. That was a manipulated vision designed to make him act rashly. But he was sure that Voldemort wanted him at the Ministry, and that he was going to get hold of that prophecy, if Harry didn’t do something. Snape would take care of it, Harry thought, but even knowing that Snape was on his way up here right now didn’t calm him.

There was going to be a fight tonight. A big one, an important one. Whether Voldemort got the prophecy or not, he was coming out in the open to do battle. He was exposing himself to force Harry to do the same. He’d gotten Dumbledore out of the way, unreachable, to be sure Dumbledore couldn’t interfere. He expected to kill Harry tonight. He expected him to react, to do something foolish. Harry wasn’t about to play by his rules, but he couldn’t sit this out, either. He didn’t know

what he was going to do, exactly. He just knew something must be done.

Snape arrived, looking cool and unruffled. He was used to being summoned by wretched people. Harry didn't doubt that Neville had explained the situation to the best of his ability, and he'd rather leave Umbridge as much in the dark as possible until it was all over. So when Snape stepped in, all Harry said was,

"Neville told you?"

"He did."

"I didn't mean to let him in. Took me completely by surprise."

"I have no doubt. Nevertheless, I do not know why I am here."

Harry was stumped on how to proceed with cluing Umbridge in to Snape's role in all this. That was kind of supposed to be a secret. Umbridge broke in. "You are here because this boy is eager to dig himself into an even deeper hole than he has already done. I assume he thinks you will believe his lies more readily than I do. I must implore you, Professor, not to give him any encouragement—"

"I was not planning to encourage him at all, Inquisitor," Snape drawled. "And I am sympathetic toward your dislike of the boy. However, he obviously has something to say."

"Call everyone," Harry said simply. "Everyone you can. The headmaster is nowhere to be found, do you understand? It's tonight. It's right now."

Snape cocked an eyebrow at Harry and turned to Umbridge with a shrug. "The boy is raving. It is likely nothing more than the strain of the examinations tomorrow, but I would suggest taking him to the infirmary for a Calming Draught. I do not appreciate having my time wasted," he said to the room in general, and he left.

The man was quite an actor, Harry thought. If that had been all there was to it, Harry honestly wouldn't have known if he and Snape were

on the same page. He would have been left wondering if Snape planned to do anything at all, or if maybe he was on Voldemort's side after all. But as he glided out the door, he left an impression in Harry's mind. A simple, quick image that even a boy of his limited skills could grasp. Snape, sending out a silvery animal whose body Harry could not quite see, pointing the conjured animal toward something. He was going to call the Order.

Umbridge turned to Harry with a smile. "Perhaps the professor is right, Mr. Rivers, perhaps a Calming Draught will lessen your propensity for hysterical falsehoods. Let us go to the infirmary, shall we?"

"Yeah, whatever," Harry muttered. He spun and grabbed Neville by the arm, casting a Muffliato charm. "Find Fred and George. They've been talking about a pretty epic distraction from studying. Tell them right now, right in front of the infirmary, would be the perfect time and place."

Neville's eyes widened, but he nodded. Umbridge broke through Harry's spell.

"I do not appreciate having secrets told in front of me," she said sweetly. "After we have seen to your health, we are going to discuss future detentions."

"Future detentions?" Harry scoffed. "There's only a week left in the year."

"There's always next year, isn't there?"

"I suppose there is, ma'am."

Am I going to see next year? Am I going to die tonight?

They saw Draco coming down the corridor from the hospital wing, looking very annoyed. He was limping. He saw Umbridge marching Harry along and paused.

“Exam stress has finally caught up with you, I see, Evan,” he drawled. Seeing Harry being forced along by Umbridge seemed to do wonders to his spirits. He was smiling, now.

“Yeah, I’ve apparently gone starkers,” Harry shrugged. “What happened to you?”

Draco scowled, and flicked his eyes at Umbridge. “Got into a fight.”

“Fighting is not allowed—” Umbridge began.

“With one of my housemates,” Draco interrupted. “Which Professor Snape put a stop to, and which detentions have already been assigned for.” He smirked back down the empty corridor. “My opponent in said fight will be okay. In a week or two.”

Harry might have laughed at that, under ordinary circumstances. Draco had gotten something, at least, out of the DL. He could win an impromptu duel. He wondered what the fight had been about, then thought he probably didn’t want to know. The best part of this was, Draco’s dad was too important to piss off, so Umbridge couldn’t punish Draco for exhibiting violent tendencies.

Draco frowned at Harry. “So, what are you really doing here?”

“Mr. Rivers is suffering under severe psychological stress,” Umbridge said, making sure she still had a firm hold on Harry’s arm, “due to—”

BOOM.

It shook the floor. Harry felt the vibrations in his feet. His heart leaped. Neville had found the twins, and they’d come through for him.

BOOM.

A whizzing noise started in. It got louder and louder, and Harry saw sparkling light come shooting up the hallway. It was no great effort to force Umbridge to let him go, a quick pinch to the proper nerve in her arm and she jumped away from him. She was ready to start howling about respect for authority, but the sparkling light, one of the twins’

fireworks, came spinning up the corridor and exploded in her face. She protected herself, but it did singe the sleeve of her robes.

CRACK.

BOOM.

POP. POP. POP.

Then the cheering started in, and Umbridge forgot her mission. She ran off down the hallway to figure out what was going on. Draco watched her go, but he just looked at Harry, who was grinning.

“What in Merlin’s name is going on, Evan?”

“Distraction,” he said. “The Weasley twins are lighting off fireworks all over the place.”

“Okay. Why?”

“So I can get out of here without telling her where I’m going.”

“And where are you going?” asked another voice.

“It would be a shame if our undefeated Quidditch hero were to disgrace or injure himself,” an identical voice added.

The twins peeked out from around the corner of a staircase, saw that Umbridge had already gone off to investigate, and stepped out.

“Neville told us you needed a distraction—”

“Which we were happy to oblige—”

“But he left us a bit in the dark.”

“So let’s hear it.”

Harry took a deep breath, considered Draco for a moment, and decided he wasn’t worth worrying about at this point.

“Voldemort,” he said simply. “There’s something big happening, and I have to go.”

“Sorry?”

“Care to repeat that?”

“Did you say Voldemort?” Draco added, looking sickened.

“I don’t have time to explain. I just have to go.”

“No, you don’t,” said yet another voice, and Hermione stepped around the same corner the twins had.

“Hermione?”

“Granger, what are you doing here?”

“Following these two,” Hermione gestured to the twins. “I saw Neville talking to them, and I thought it might have something to do with you,” she said, looking at Harry. She stepped right in front of him. “You’re not going.”

“Yes. I am.”

“Why you?”

“Yes, why you?” all three of the boys began to ask.

Harry held out his hands to tell them all to shut up. “Look, there’s just no time,” he said, his headache reaching dangerous levels as he tried to sort this all out. “I have to go, right now. This is about the Order, and about Voldemort. I have to be there.”

“You know you don’t, you said you didn’t believe—”

“Hermione,” Harry cut her off as gently as possible. “I don’t believe. But that’s not why I’m going. I’m going because I can distract him. I can hold him off until the Order gets there. I’m not stupid enough to think I can fight him, but I can talk to him. He doesn’t know me at all,

and I can make him think he needs to. Even if it's just for five minutes, it will help. Otherwise, he could have what he wants and be gone before the adults can arrive. I'm going there to do my part. That's what I've always wanted to do. And tonight, my part is to keep him in one place until they can find Dumbledore."

Hermione was crying as she gripped his hand. "I'm coming with you."

"The hell you are," he said, throwing her hand away from himself. "You are staying here where it's safe."

"Too late for that," she said softly. "I can help you."

"This is about Voldemort?" George said uneasily. "You're really going to help the Order fight him, Evan?"

"Yes."

"Then we're coming, too," Fred said.

Harry growled at them all, hardly recognising the noise that ripped out of his throat. "No! You did your part! You'll be lucky if Umbridge lets you sit for your NEWTs! I'm not letting you get yourselves killed! Not any of you!"

"I wasn't volunteering," Draco said, looking shocked and nervous.

"You can't tell us what to do," Hermione said, her jaw set and her eyes dangerous.

"You helped get us ready to fight, remember?" Fred said.

"What for, if not for this?" George added.

Harry just stared at them, opening and closing his mouth. There was an ambush waiting for him at the Ministry. If he showed up with allies, it could tip the balance in his favour. If he were going to pick his preferred allies, they would have been considerably older and more experienced, but he didn't really have a choice at the moment.

“All right,” he said hoarsely. “Let’s go.”

There was the sound of running feet, and Neville came pounding down the corridor. “Yes, let’s go,” he panted. “Umbridge is—”

“Stop!” shouted a strident voice. “All of you, just stop right there.” She came striding along in her horrid pink heels, her face a terrible mask of anger. Her hair had gone crazy and there were scorch marks all over her. “I don’t know what you could have been thinking, but I will not this, this, this chaos! I will not have it, do you hear me? You, Mr. Rivers, you will be severely punished, and your little friends will—”

Harry laughed. A long, peeling laugh that echoed off the walls and mixed in with the reverberating crackling and booming noises of the fireworks. He put all of his fear and frustration behind it, and it sounded wild and unhinged. She stopped and stared at him.

“Don’t you get it, you heartless bitch? It’s over. One way or the other, your power over me ends tonight. I don’t care anymore. Detentions, scarring up my hand, blah blah blah. I don’t care. I’m through with you. Go cry to Fudge. I beg you, do it now and get out of my way. Because I swear to Merlin that if you do not, I will not leave you conscious. I have things to do, and you are in my way.”

“Chaos— You— Punished—” she gasped, her mean little eyes wide with shock and past the point of coherency.

“Merlin, you are such an ignorant cow,” he said with feeling. “Petrificus Totalus.”

She fell to the floor, eyes still shocked senseless.

“Well, are we going?” Harry asked them.

They began to run back to Sirius’ office, the closest fireplace with a Floo connection. As he ran at the front, he heard two people arguing, and wasn’t sure exactly what to do about it. He just kept running.

“Let me go, you freak!”

“Hah, not likely.”

“I am not going with you!”

“You’re coming as far as the office,” Fred replied.

“Why?” Draco sputtered, dragging his feet as much as possible.

“So you can’t do anything to stop us. Don’t think I don’t know where your loyalties are, Malfoy. I’m keeping you in plain sight as long as possible.”

Harry nearly cheered for Neville, but instead did the more expedient thing and kept running. He turned his head enough to see that Draco had a twin at either arm, dragging him along.

“They’re right. Keep up or I’ll levitate you out in front to catch any stray hexes.”

Draco, helpless, ran along beside them until they got to the office. Harry threw some powder into the fireplace and said, “We’re going to the Ministry building. Department of Mysteries.” He looked at Draco, and didn’t know what to do with him.

Neville spoke up, glaring at Draco. “Just go back to your common room and keep your gob shut, got it?”

But then Harry knew what he wanted to do. A lot of things were coming to an end tonight, and this might as well come to an end, too. If an ambush was waiting at the Ministry, Lucius Malfoy was likely to be a part of it. It was time to quit pretending. “Draco. You’re one of the best duelers in the DL. You really are. I let myself hope that being around me all this time, knowing the people who are on this side of the fight, might make you one of us. I don’t know if it did any good, but we’re about to find out.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“If it’s time for the rest of us to decide our loyalties, you might as decide yours tonight, as well,” Harry said. He grabbed firm hold of

Draco, and stepped back into the fireplace. “You’re going to be a great asset on somebody’s side tonight. It’s up to you whose side that is.”

“Evan, don’t—”

“The Ministry!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

They fought their way through the fire. The flames boiled around them, and they felt themselves becoming severed, disconnected, from the known reality, for just the briefest instant. They'd done it so often that it was not a strange sensation anymore—but locked together, struggling to break free even though you couldn't really move, as you traveled vast distances in a rush of green flame: surreal. Then they arrived, and tumbled out of the fireplace, and even then he didn't let go.

Draco fought him with everything he had, but the other boy was an immovable rock. With a wand, the outcome of a fight would have been unknown, but Evan Rivers had trained his body as much as his mind, and he wasn't letting Draco anywhere near his wand. So Draco went limp, pinned to the cold floor, staring up at the other boy and allowing hatred to burn in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

"I hate people who try to play both sides," Evan answered. "I've let you do it all year, but you're going to have to make a very public decision in a moment."

Draco was still very unclear as to what was taking place here. He knew they were at the Ministry (Evan yelling "The Ministry" in his ear had made that good and obvious) but he didn't know why. Evan had said the Dark Lord would be here. That could only mean that he'd come here with a contingent of some of the worst criminals in society, the people who'd escaped in the big Azkaban breakout, and that they'd all come here to fight. Why? And how would Evan even know that? Draco knew that Professor Rivers was one of Dumbledore's people, and everyone knew what that meant, but Evan . . .

His father's suspicions that John and Evan Rivers had come to England for a specific purpose, the reason he'd wanted Draco to watch Evan, to gain his trust, to get as close to him as possible . . . and now this boy seemed to know what the Dark Lord was doing, like he could actually know that when he'd been at school all night . . .

“What are you?” Draco whispered, as the others began popping out of the fireplace and regrouping. He’d been asking himself what it was about Evan all year, and the only thing he could think of was so ludicrous that it was laughable, so he’d kept his thoughts to himself. His father would have . . .

Oh, Merlin, his father. He threw himself toward the fireplace. “Goodbye,” he gasped.

Hands grabbed him and held him back.

“I know you’re a coward, but that’s just pathetic,” Evan growled.

Then came his saving grace. He could have kissed those pathetic weasel twins.

“Hey, Evan—”

“We were thinking—”

“About how he’s supposed to be good in a fight—”

“And how we’d rather not fight him—”

“So how about we let him run along?”

Draco held his breath, still hoping he could escape without a fight. So he didn’t want to be here, so what? They could call him a coward, and this coward would go to sleep without injuries and without declaring loyalty in a war whose outcome he could not yet see.

Evan was ignoring them all. He was looking only at Draco. And his eyes were so hard, so disassociated from all emotion, that Draco shivered. What kid their age looked like that? What had this boy done and been in his life? The only thing he could see in those eyes was resolve. He was planning to win this fight.

“I know how your father works, what he’s always done. Never saying one way or the other, waiting to see who wins. I know what you’re trying to do. You want to say you’re my friend so that if our side wins,

you can claim you were with us all along. And if they win, you were just spying, like your father wanted. But you're not him. You have no idea how much pressure I've felt to be just like my father, but I am my own person. I have my own ideals. It's time you figured out yours."

"Don't you get it, you fool?" Draco said disdainfully, still unable to break the other boy's grip. "I'm a Slytherin. That's what we do. Your kind can make their high and noble moral decisions, but it's us who come out on top." He tried to pull away. "My father is here, Evan. If he sees me with you, it's over, and I can't have that. Let me go now and you don't have to worry about what I'll do to you to escape. Just let me go." He wondered if he sounded reasonable, or just like a beggar. He wasn't sure, after being pinned to the floor by the Gryffindorish foreign transplant who'd been showing him up all year, if his shattered dignity could take looking like a beggar.

"Evan, are we here to fight or what?" one of the red-haired weasels said.

"We're wasting time," Longbottom added. He threw in a glare at Draco that Draco couldn't help but sneer at. He was so very glad he didn't have to pretend friendship with that boring, slow, old man anymore. Pretending friendship with Evan had been so much more enjoyable—

Oh, Merlin. He was not thinking that, he was so not thinking that he liked hanging out with the freak that was keeping him from any chance of survival this night. He was a big-headed bastard with high-flown ideals and he was always trying to force them onto Draco. He was a big, dumb jock who never thought about anything but working out— well, okay, that wasn't true, he was one of the best students in their year. Pretending to be friends with him had improved Draco's grades, his dueling skills, his reputation, sometimes actually made him feel guilty for the way he looked at life . . . damn, they might have actually been friends if it weren't for all this divided-loyalty stuff. That was sort of depressing to think about.

"I know your father is here," Evan said. "Along with all those people who he probably helped escape from Azkaban. So there's your choice. If you're going to be on his side, then go, find him, be on his

side. I won't stop you from going there. But know this." His fingers squeezed into Draco's arms so hard they were leaving bruises. "If you choose this side, if you stay with us tonight—"

"Right," Draco scoffed, then got squeezed harder. "Ow."

"Stay with us, and I have your back. You don't have to be afraid of your father. You decide this friendship is worth something to you, and I won't let him anywhere near you. Got it?"

Draco shook his head, and took a step back. This time, Evan actually let him go. "And what would you do?" Draco asked, knowing that however skilled Evan might be, he wasn't going to beat Lucius Malfoy.

"Whatever I have to," Evan answered, and those eyes, empty of everything but determination, were a promise that he meant it. Then he broke that eye contact and swept the rest of them. "Okay, let's go. Let's do this."

"Where are we going, Evan? Do you know?"

That was Granger. She of the bushy hair and feminine wiles that had gotten an international Quidditch star banned from England. Ugh. He didn't want to be on her side, even if she was an intelligent and powerful witch.

"This way."

"Evan, are you sure you want to do this?"

"This has been coming my whole life. It doesn't really matter whether I want it or not, not now. I'm here, so I'm doing it."

And once again, Draco was left wondering. What did that mean? He knew what he thought it meant, and all those little hints and clues added up. Why else would Evan be here, doing this, if he wasn't what Draco thought he was? Could he really be so unattached that he could say something like that and mean it?

They all started off, jogging, toward something. Something unplanned, but somehow inevitable. Destiny, maybe. Draco threw a longing look at the fireplace. He had no Floo powder. To get out of here, he had to go with them. Or maybe he could just wait here, hiding, until the Ministry opened for business in the morning and he could slip out. But the answers to his questions . . . they were running off, deeper into the building. Where his father waited, and the side he was supposed to be on.

As he broke into a run, keeping them in sight but staying a careful distance back, he wondered if it would be possible to hate his father. He'd never been quite sure whether he worshiped him or wanted to kill him. Just at this moment, he was sure he hated him. He would never have been here, facing this, if it weren't for him. And now he was going off to join him in battle, irrevocably declaring himself for the Dark Lord, tying himself to his father inescapably.

Wasn't he?

Harry didn't know what was going to happen as he led his friends and one unknown entity deep into the Ministry building. He knew where he was going because he'd asked Sirius for a map directly from the entrance of the building to the shelf where his prophecy was kept, as soon as he'd heard that the thing was kept here. But that was all he knew. He didn't know whether he would be able to distract Voldemort, he didn't know if he or his friends would make it out. He didn't know what Draco would do. He'd done everything he could, and now it was in the hands of chance.

He gripped his wand, the handle warm and comfortable after a year of constant use, and felt better. Not just chance. He'd spent five years getting ready for this. He was still a child, but he was not unprepared, and he was not unskilled. He'd gotten away before, and he had allies on their way. He could do this. He didn't even have to win. All he had to do was keep the prophecy away from Voldemort until they could find Dumbledore and bring him here. Voldemort wouldn't fight him. Harry was sure of it. Once the headmaster got here, Voldemort would retreat. He just had to last that long.

But how long would that be? And how many of his own people would fall tonight? He couldn't afford to dwell on that. He could only try to think of what he could do. But he could think of nothing. He was going to stall, but he wouldn't really know how to do that until he was standing in front of the other wizard. No use making plans. Just run.

He was the only one not gasping for breath and wiping sweat from his eyes when they skidded to a halt in the hall of prophecies. All that running was good for something. He was still fresh for the fight.

But where was the fight? The darkened hall was empty.

"Lumos," Hermione whispered, and a small light erupted from her wand. All it showed was that Draco was skulking a few rows back. Harry was the only one who saw him hiding there, and he let it go. The moment had not yet come when the boy had to decide. Harry wasn't holding out much hope that he'd pick the right side, but he was kind of hoping that Draco's father would be distracted by his son and Voldemort's side would lose a fighter instead of gaining one.

"Lumos!" Harry said firmly, and allowed bright light to spill from his wand and illuminate the whole area. And there they were. Just a couple of people standing there in black robes, hardly moving, but suddenly he couldn't breathe. Was Voldemort under one of those robes?

"Evan," Fred hissed, stepping closer to his twin brother. "What's going on?"

"Well, well, well," said a smooth, cold voice. "The Dark Lord was right about you all along." The taller of the two black-robed figures stepped closer to Harry. "Dumbledore didn't hide you very well, did he?"

Harry decided that he was going to play dumb. Obviously they knew who he was, but he was counting on the Order having the element of surprise, so he had to act like they weren't coming. Like he'd just run off to do this. That meant he had to look small and scared and young. Hah, not that hard, was it? All he really had to do was let loose that frightened, screaming voice he'd buried somewhere in his chest.

"Where's Sirius?" he said, letting his voice tremble. He wanted to be whimpering, and act like he'd do whatever they wanted. At least until Voldemort showed up. "What did you do to him?"

"If you cared about him, you'd have gotten here a little more quickly," the man under the robe said impatiently.

"I came as quick as I could," Harry whined. "The High Inquisitor wouldn't let me go, she—"

"Ah, yes, that woman Umbridge." He sounded cheerful about that. "She's practically working on our side without meaning to, isn't she?"

"I'll tell her you said that," Harry said with a moment of dark humour. "Tell me, please, where is Sirius? I saw him being tortured, he—"

"You poor fool," the man chuckled. "My master is a powerful wizard. He doesn't need to risk himself just to get to you. You saw exactly what he wanted you to see."

"But I came to save him," Harry said, trying to sound confused even though he had finally figured out the real plan. Voldemort wasn't even here, that bastard, he'd sent his lackeys to get the prophecy once Harry had shown up to get it for them. No risk to himself, indeed. Harry spitefully wished he had a camera, so he could rip the mask off the man in front of him and put him on the front page of the Daily Prophet. "I brought my friends to help me."

"Poor baby," tittered the person under the other robe. A woman? Harry only knew of one woman who would be there. The recent Azkaban escapee. Bellatrix Lestrange. One of the scarier people Harry had ever heard of, probably scarier than Voldemort himself just because she was such a complete nutcase.

"You thought you could stand up to the Dark Lord with such as these?" the man hissed.

The others, who'd been looking more and more scared as Harry pretended to flounder, drew themselves up straighter at that.

"That's right," George said bravely. "In case you didn't know, we've already done it once."

The woman threw her masked head back and let out a mad peal of laughter. "You must be the bitty little ones who were almost killed by Quirrel."

"We won, didn't we?" Fred hissed, but movement had caught the woman's eye and she spun around with her wand out.

"Looks like one of the babies doesn't want to play with us," she hissed, then flicked her wand and pulled Draco out of the shadows. She wasn't gentle about it, and he ended pitching forward on his knees, barely keeping himself from falling on his face in front of the two Death Eaters. He scrambled to push his hair back, but he stayed on his knees, his face pleading as he looked up at the masked man.

"I'm so glad it's you," he gasped.

Harry stiffened. He ought to have known who was behind that mask, with that smooth voice.

"He was keeping me hostage, thinking he could make you stand down by threatening me. I told him it wouldn't work, but he wouldn't let me go—"

"Get up."

"Yes, sir," he gasped, and jumped to his feet. He turned and faced Harry. Standing next to his father.

Harry looked him in the eyes and nodded. If that was the way it was going to be, better that it was decided now, before they were actually forced to fight. But when Lucius Malfoy saw that, saw the understanding pass between them, he grabbed his son painfully tight and shook him by the arm.

"What is this? Is this a plan between you?"

"No, Father, of course not, I—"

"I ask you to watch him for me, and instead you choose his side?" Lucius spat out. "I have heard reports that you are close to him, that you are with him often, but I never hear anything from you. I hear that you are seen in company with the Gryffindor students. I can only make one conclusion, Draco, and I am disgusted. Are you so weak that you couldn't resist? Is he that convincing?"

"I was doing as you said," Draco whispered, his eyes horrified. "I was never on his side, I was watching him for you. I'm not—"

"Then where do you go?" Lucius spat out. "I hear that you often are absent from the Slytherin rooms. Did you think I would not have eyes at the school? Did you? Where do you go? What have you been doing?" He shook him harder. "Tell me!"

Draco closed his eyes, his face looking ashen. "I can't."

Lucius pulled off his mask, and blond hair slid over his shoulder, just the shade of his sons. Without the mask, he actually looked more frightening. His face was twisted with anger. "What did you say to me?"

"I can't tell you," Draco repeated, eyes still closed. "I want to, but I can't. I had to make a vow, if I didn't make it I wouldn't have been able to keep watch, so—"

"You lie," Lucius hissed. "You lie to me. Had you any respect for me as your father, you would not dare. Is it that you no longer wish to be my son? You may have your wish, if it's come to that."

Harry felt sick. His stomach churned to see this. Draco had made his decision, and now it had backfired on him. Their Unbreakable Vow had made it impossible for him to convince his father that he was telling the truth. Lucius wouldn't kill him, not his own son, but Lucius served Voldemort and Voldemort might. Harry had put Draco in this position, and he had to take responsibility for it. This wasn't what Draco wanted, but he didn't have much choice now.

People could not be Summoned, but that wasn't the only way.

“Levicorpus,” Harry said. “Mobilicorpus.” He pulled Draco away from his father, the boy too shaken to fight the spell, and then stepped in front of Draco.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Draco muttered.

“This isn’t what you wanted, but you’re stuck with me for now,” Harry said. “I told you, if this happened, that I’d protect you. So stay put, would you?”

“The Dark Lord will be most interested to hear about this, Lucius,” the woman said with vicious humour. “Can’t you even control your own family?”

“How dare you?” Lucius snarled in fury.

“Little Malfoy Junior, going over to the side of the Light—”

“If I hear another word out of you, Bellatrix, so help me, I will kill you.”

“Fine. Then let’s get what we came for,” she snapped.

“Anybody mind telling me what we did come for?” Fred spoke up in annoyance. Everyone on their side had stepped right up behind Harry, forming up as though for battle, and now they wanted to know what the fight was about. It was only fair.

“That,” Harry said, pointing up to the proper shelf. He could see the label with the initials that marked it as his.

“What is it?”

Bellatrix laughed again. “You came without knowing why? How adorable!” She eyed Harry like a piece of meat. “And I thought Lucius was the one with the silver tongue. You must be very persuasive.”

“We came to fight Voldemort,” Hermione said bravely. “He came for the same thing. It doesn’t matter what he said, we just happen to be on the same side.”

“And what did you come for?” Neville asked, looking at Bellatrix with loathing and a touch of fear. “Come to finish off my family?”

It was inevitable that everyone would know what had happened to Neville’s parents, with him having been such a public figure, but they had probably forgotten. They all looked surprised by his comment. But Bellatrix was cackling again.

“I’d love to, but my master waits. Now, then,” she said, turning back to Harry. “The prophecy. Get it.”

Harry chuckled. “Voldemort sent you to retrieve the prophecy, thinking I’d just get it down and hand it over? He must be pretty stupid.”

Bellatrix gasped, and Lucius stepped forward with menace.

“You will learn not to speak that way,” he ground out. “But first, we have lessons to teach you about defiance. It will do you no good to resist this, boy. It is only a question of how much pain we deal out before you do as we wish.”

Harry shook his head. “Go ahead. Any amount of pain is worth it, to keep Voldemort from getting his hands on that prophecy. You didn’t actually think I’d just do what you wanted because you asked?”

He’d given up all semblance of looking scared and confused, but they were past that, now. A spell came shooting his way, but he blocked it.

“Do not dare to speak his name,” Bellatrix spat at him.

“What name, Voldemort?” Harry asked with affected innocence. “Whyever not?”

“You are not good enough to kiss the ground he walks on, you half-blooded brat!” she shrieked, trying to curse him again. Harry blocked it again.

"I can see that torturing you will not get us what we want," Lucius said, cutting into their little spat. "Imperio."

Harry felt a woozy sensation. His arms and legs felt strange. He wanted to go get the prophecy now, just take it down off the shelf and—

He broke it. "Wow, that was a brilliant idea," he sneered at Lucius. "I never thought anyone might use that spell on me, so I never practiced defending myself. Sheer genius, that."

Lucius shrugged. "So be it. Crucio."

Harry threw up his shield yet again, but nothing happened to him. Hermione fell the floor, screaming. Lucius smiled at Harry, and Harry watched helplessly while she clawed uselessly at the tiled floor, her pretty face twisted in torment, unable to help her wailing cries of pain. She was beyond coherency. What was going through her mind, if anything? Was she picturing Viktor Krum, standing over her, beating on her?

"Stupefy!" Harry shouted in rage.

Lucius blocked it, still maintaining the spell on Hermione, who still screamed. The spell caromed into a shelf and knocked down two prophecies, which hit the floor and let out a puff of smoke. Eerie voices spoke, echoing with Hermione's screams in the huge hall. Harry couldn't hear what they said, but it gave him an idea.

He swept his arm in front of the shelf and sent a barrage of glass balls at Lucius. He had to give up the spell to defend himself from the attacking globes, some of them breaking against his head and shoulders, which were still protected from cuts by the robes. More smoke, more voices. Bellatrix began sending her spells again, but Fred helped him block them while George helped a trembling Hermione back to her feet.

Lucius put his arm out and stopped Bellatrix. He swept broken glass calmly from his robes and gave Harry a look of cold hatred.

“We wanted this to be easy,” he said. “But if you prefer it to be difficult, we can oblige.”

“What do you—”

There were cries of surprise, and Harry felt somebody touching him. He snapped his head back and smashed his skull into someone’s face. They stumbled back, howling, and Harry drew a tight shield up, darting a few paces away. More Death Eaters. Several of them. Grabbing hold of his friends. They’d been sneaking up behind while they’d all been occupied watching Hermione being tortured.

The Death Eater who’d grabbed Draco gave Lucius a confused look. “Should I—”

“Hold him,” Lucius commanded brusquely.

The Death Eaters had their wands out and all Harry’s friends in their hands.

“As I said, we tried to do this the easy way. Now we will do it the hard way. Are you listening to me? We will kill your friends if you do not retrieve that prophecy and hand it over. We. Will. Kill. Them.” He was just way too angry about getting hit with the prophecies, Harry thought. Or maybe it was that Draco was being held as one of them right now. Yeah, that would do it.

“Kill them? Even your son?”

Lucius was nearly trembling with rage. “Do you care so much about his fate?”

Harry looked at Draco. Draco looked back at him. He was burning up with passionate anger, either at Harry or Lucius, or perhaps even both of them. He was staring at Harry, daring him to answer that. He had his jaw clenched and he was straining against the Death Eater holding him.

“These are my allies in this fight. We came here with the understanding that we’d protect each other,” Harry answered. “And

now you've made it up to me to protect all of them. Even Draco. So yes, I will protect him from you if I have to. I don't think you'll kill him. Will you kill the others? We're not even of age, Lucius. You're going to kill children?"

"No one was forced to come here tonight," Lucius answered. "Were they?"

Harry saw it in his eyes. He would not fail his master. He was going to bring the prophecy back to Voldemort, however he had to do it. Harry could not continue to resist this if he expected to bring his friends back with him. So he'd do it. He'd get the prophecy down, and they'd let his friends go. Then Harry would take the prophecy back. He had the advantage in this fight. He didn't care if the prophecy made it out of the building, only his friends. So he'd wait until his friends were free to defend themselves, then he'd go after Lucius. If he could take the prophecy whole, he would, out of respect for what Dumbledore and the Order wanted. But if he had to destroy it, he would. He didn't care.

"Okay," Harry said, letting his shoulders droop in defeat. Temporary defeat. "Okay, I'll get it." He walked to the shelf, feeling a pit in his stomach like he was walking to his own execution, and got the prophecy down off the shelf.

"What is this?" Fred gasped out against the arm across his throat. "Just what in hell is going on here?"

Harry turned to Fred with a sad smile. "You haven't figured out who I am yet?"

There was doubt in Fred's eyes, like he knew what Harry meant but wasn't ready for it yet.

"I did," Draco said. "Quite a while ago, to be honest."

"Good for you," Fred snarled. "But what is that?" He was looking at the prophecy.

"Shut up," the Death Eater holding him growled, tightening the arm over his throat and choking him.

"I'd rather like an explanation, myself," the one holding Hermione spoke up.

"I see," Harry said with a faint smile. "You're Voldemort's loyal followers, and he doesn't tell you a thing. How nice."

"Doesn't look like you explained much to your side, either," the one holding Fred said.

Harry shook his head. "It's not my side. I'm not in charge of this. Never wanted to be." He held up the prophecy, holding it out toward Lucius. "When he listens to this, tell him that, would you? He chose this. Not me. I didn't want it. Why do you think I tried so hard to hide? I wanted nothing to do with this fight, and it's him who forced us to this. You tell him I was never a threat until he made me one."

"I'll be sure to deliver your message," Lucius said stiffly. Then his hands closed over the prophecy.

Harry stepped back, letting out a deep breath. Would he let them go? "We have our orders," Lucius said in his commanding voice. "They don't change because he brought children instead of real allies."

Harry frowned, gripping his wand.

"Kill them."

The bottom of his stomach dropped out.

"Guys, this is ridiculous, we have work to do," Harry said. He'd been practicing on Hermione, and she followed him over to check on the three boys, who certainly did not look like they were doing what the rest of the DL was doing.

"Come on, this is work," Lee Jordan said cheerfully.

"Are you kidding? You're supposed to be practising non-verbal Disarming Charms, and you're trying to come up with code words."

Neville and Draco, who had been paired up because most people in the room refused to work with Draco, sauntered over.

“Code words?” Draco repeated, voice dripping with disdain.

“You don’t think they might be useful?” Fred challenged.

“Think about it, Evan. If we’re in a fight, communication might be vital.”

In all honesty, Harry was impressed by the idea. Being able to communicate with allies without giving away what you were saying to the enemy, that was great. However, until they could non-verbally Disarm each other, it was a waste of time. What good would it be to communicate in a fight if you couldn’t even survive long enough to need it?

“We’re just coming up with scenarios where we might need it. For instance, if everyone is fighting but we’ve got a sniper tucked away, they could warn the others that they’re about to do something. Or, if we’re all captured and we need to get away, someone might be able to get to their wand, and they’d need a way to tell everyone that they’d done it and to get ready. We just need a word to say that without letting on what we’re up to.”

Harry thought that through for a moment. “If everyone’s under attack or captured, the only way to tip the balance would be to get everyone to duck or something and cast the biggest Blasting Curse possible.”

“I hate to tell you this, mate, but you’re probably the only one in the room who could pull that off,” George said.

“Yeah, we were thinking more of just letting everyone know not to give up yet, really, that someone was going to get free and they should get ready for it.”

“Or in the case of the sniper, that they were going to take out an enemy that someone was losing to, and that someone should probably get out of the way.”

"I can't be the only one in the room who can cast a Blasting Curse," Harry interrupted.

"The only one who could cast one big enough that everyone would need to duck."

"Oh, please," Draco mumbled.

"Draco, we've seen your Blasting Curse, remember?" Hermione said.

"Well, if we come up with a good code phrase, we'll let you know," Lee said, hastily interrupting the beginning of an argument. They'd all gotten good at that since they'd had to be in the same room as Draco every week. "Everything we've come up with so far is kind of obvious."

"Like what?" Harry asked, enjoying this now, even if it was silly.

"Um, so far, 'everybody duck.' We were thinking maybe 'Hungarian Horntails' or something."

Harry just made a disgusted face.

"Merlin, such amateurs," Draco murmured, wandering away.

"Right so, back to work," Lee said briskly. Fred's wand jumped out of his wand. "Your turn, George."

"Wait," Harry said, his pulse pounding.

Lucius sneered at him.

Harry looked at Fred. "You still think I'm the only one?" he said, his voice trembling with the need for everyone to understand him.

"The only one what?" Fred said.

Harry sucked in a deep breath. "Hungarian Horntails," he said clearly.

There were puzzled frowns all around, but first George, then all the others, gasped. Simultaneously, they all threw themselves down, a few dragging their captors with them.

“Confringo!” Harry screamed.

There was a visible, silent pulse of power. The wave of the spell washed over everyone, causing hair and robes to blow back. Then sound. A lot of sound. Wood cracked, and a thousand glass bulbs shattered. Someone screamed. It was a deafening wave of sound and violent concussion, the boom making the whole hall echo with it, and Harry stood at the center with the backwash of all the noise and propelled air sending his shaggy blond mop of hair every which way and making him wince and cover his ears.

Some of the Death Eaters had gotten up Shield Charms. Lucius was one of them. He was once again covered in shattered glass, but he was on his feet and the prophecy was cradled, undamaged, in his careful hands. But the chaos was erupting around him as Harry’s friends jumped back up in the wake of the Death Eaters’ surprise and began to fight.

“Stupefy!”

“Expelliarmus!”

“Impedimentia!”

“Langlock!”

“Relashio!”

They were all facing off, throwing Leg-Locker curses, tongue-tying curses, Stunning spells, all kinds of things. Harry saw fire being thrown around, saw jets of red light, and heard harsh men screaming out Cruciatus Curses. Draco had tried the easy way out, going to his knees and holding up his wand in both hands, but they didn’t accept his surrender and forced him to fight. Harry noticed all this, but his eyes were on Lucius, who was backing up slowly, surveying it all. Then he turned and fled. Bellatrix was on his heels.

“Neville!” Harry shouted. Neville was the only one who would understand how important the prophecy they carried was. “Neville, come on!”

Neville nodded, but he was battling a man with a scruffy goatee that he couldn't get the better of.

“Reducto!” Harry shouted, pointing his wand beneath the Death Eater's feet. The tiles on the ground practically dissolved, and the man tripped and fell.

Neville didn't waste time thanking him, just followed him. They ran, hunting down Lucius and Bellatrix. They had to stop them before they could get out of the building, or they'd never be able to keep the prophecy from Voldemort. Harry couldn't let him hear it. He couldn't let him hear that death was the only option. He was still counting on finding some other way out of this war. It didn't have to end that way, but it would if Voldemort heard that prophecy. He'd do anything to keep Voldemort from hearing it, believing it, forcing him to live according to it.

“Lucius!” Harry bellowed when he got close enough. “You're running? Running from a bunch of kids? Are you afraid that your own son will curse you?”

Bellatrix turned around and tried to Stun him, but she was way too off-balance, and the jet of light went harmlessly two feet wide of him. Neville used her distraction to try to trip her and knock her down, but she defended herself. She was Lucius' bodyguard, obviously. She'd been briefed on how important the prophecy was, even if the rest of the Death Eater's hadn't.

“The war is far from over, but I've beaten you!” Harry shouted at Lucius. “I've got your son! You're in this to make sure your family comes out on top, right? Well, now you'd better make sure I win, if you want your kid to survive this!”

Harry had his doubts that Draco was ever going to forgive him for dragging him to this fight, much less would he actually join Harry's

side. Assuming they all made it out of here alive and assuming they went back to school at all, Harry would have to watch his back every moment to be sure Draco wasn't there ready to assassinate him. But taunting Lucius to make him slow down so Harry could catch up was the only plan he had.

"He's mine now!" Harry said, sounding almost joyful. "You've lost to me, Lucius!"

And then Lucius turned around. "Damn you, Potter," he said, and his voice actually frightened Harry. The taunting might have worked too well. He'd wanted to slow Lucius down, not make him murderous. "Avada Kedavra."

Harry threw himself down and the green light passed over him, but his heart pounded. Bellatrix was grabbing at Lucius, imploring him to stop, reminding him that he was not to touch the Potter boy because he belonged to their master. Lucius was not being reasonable, unfortunately. He cast it again. Harry rolled to the side. Now that the curse had been introduced, it was apparently a free-for-all. They were going to kill him. This fight had just been a fight, but now it was a fight to the death. Harry threw himself to the side, tucking his shoulder to roll forward as another Killing Curse came his way. He had no time to wrap his head around the idea that he might die, he was too busy figuring out a way to get out of here.

"Neville, forget it, let's go!" he shouted.

But Neville was furiously casting spells, and so Harry got up and stood with him. They threw out every curse they knew, desperately fast, both of them gasping for breath. They were doing something. Lucius and Bellatrix were dancing around, shielding, throwing out curses of their own. Harry and Neville weren't winning by any means, but they were fighting, not dying. They were holding their own. It was a heady thing. So heady that Bellatrix wasn't the only one laughing wildly. Harry and Neville stood shoulder-to-shoulder, and Neville was laughing.

"This is it!" Neville was saying. "Stupefy! This is what everything was for! Confringo! So I could do this! Expelliarmus, Expelliarmus, oh

forget it, Stupefy! The last six years weren't a waste of time! Impedimenta!"

Harry was dripping with sweat and he was desperate. He ran forward, ducking, dodging, shielding, until he was right in front of Lucius. Then while Lucius was trying to figure out what in hell Harry thought he was doing, Harry drew in his arm and punched, smashing the glass ball Lucius cradled in one hand and driving the shattered fragments into Lucius' chest. Lucius wasn't injured, but still, he gasped in shock, and for a moment the fight ceased.

Ghostly smoke rose up around them. The alien voice, released from its ball, spoke the prophecy that Harry had been told about but that he couldn't deny he'd wanted to hear.

"... born as the seventh month dies ..."

That was both of them, Harry thought, taking a step back to rejoin Neville.

"... mark him as his equal ..."

Okay, that was probably just him.

"... neither can live while the other survives."

Now that was the bit Harry had really not wanted anyone to hear. Not good. So not good. They had to capture Bellatrix and Lucius and make sure they couldn't speak to Voldemort, couldn't communicate what they'd heard.

"Lucius," Bellatrix whispered, staring at the glass in Lucius' bleeding hands.

Harry carefully pried a shard of glass from his knuckle, wincing as blood flowed out from the wound. "Well, that's that, I suppose," he said cheerfully. "Now you can't give it to him."

"You sound strangely happy for a boy who has just received a death sentence," Lucius said.

“Who, me? I’m not planning to die.”

“When the Dark Lord hears of this, he will stop at nothing, Potter.”

“He’s not going to hear of this,” Harry shrugged. “At least, you won’t tell him.”

“And how do you plan to stop me, Potter? I have held back because the Dark Lord has requested it, but I am certain that he will understand any action I am require to take to deliver this information to him safely.”

“I do appreciate your restraint,” Harry grinned.

The smile incensed Lucius. “I will make you wish for death,” he vowed, and he raised his wand to curse Harry. It was plucked neatly from his grip.

“Don’t ever threaten my godson, not in front of me,” Sirius said, placing Lucius’ wand in his jacket pocket. “Sorry I’m late,” he said to Harry, winking. “You seem to be holding up well.”

Bellatrix shrieked in panic when she saw all the new arrivals, and she did something to her arm. Harry knew that she had the Dark Mark, and he realised what she’d done. She’d called him. Voldemort was on his way. Harry’s heart began to pound. They’d tell him that the prophecy said Harry must die, and Voldemort would kill him right here. Sirius wouldn’t be able to stop him.

“Oh, thank Merlin, they’re here,” Harry heard someone say behind him, and turned around to see his friends coming.

Hermione and George were hobbling as quickly as they could, carrying the weight of Draco and Fred, who were both looking decidedly unwell and not particularly conscious. George didn’t look so good himself, with blood streaking his temple and cheek and the hand holding his wand trembling with pain. Hot on their heels were three of the five Death Eaters who’d come to back up Lucius and

Bellatrix. They stopped, and looked carefully around at the scene before them.

Tonks came rushing out of the group of new arrivals, took one look at the students, and said to Hermione, "Get them out of here. All four of you, go to the hospital wing at Hogwarts." She turned to Harry and Neville. "Both of you as well."

They both looked at her and didn't speak. They didn't move, either.

"Neville, go," Harry said quietly. "Help Hermione get them out."

"I can fight."

"You may have to," Harry said. "Please."

Neville nodded, and took Draco from Hermione. All the adults stood frozen for a moment.

"Well, I ain't lettin' that one escape, he knocked out two of my teeth!" one of the Death Eaters cried out, and went for either Fred or George.

That did it. Everyone fell to fighting, Tonks and Shacklebolt rushing in like the Aurors they were while Remus and Sirius moved to stand back to back waited for the enemy to come to them. That Doge bloke was here, too, and that was enough fighters, so Harry got out of the way. Neville was guarding the injured students while they retreated, and he seemed happy enough with his job, so Harry simply stood aside. He wasn't leaving. Dumbledore wasn't here yet, so they needed him to distract Voldemort when the dark wizard showed up. By the smug look on Bellatrix's face while she dueled, he was on his way.

And then suddenly he was there. Harry didn't see how he arrived, but the one person besides himself who was not fighting caught his eye, and he had to stand very still to keep himself from stepping back until he could find the fireplace and get the hell out. He did not want to face this man.

But he did. Voldemort saw him, and walked toward him. He looked happy.

"My dear Harry, I did so hope to meet you here," Voldemort said.

"I'm sure you did. But the thing you came for has been destroyed, so I wouldn't get too happy yet." Harry sounded breathless and his bravado too obviously false, but it was the best he had.

"Harry, you are young. You have not learned yet that such abrasive comments will not get you what you want as quickly as simple politeness."

Harry shrugged, seeing that Voldemort was too in the moment to be worried about the loss of the prophecy. It was a problem to deal with after he'd dealt with the situation before him. "I'm not very good at polite. Sorry."

"You are not very good at hiding, either," Voldemort observed. "Or did you think I did not know where you were, this past year?"

"You'd have to be a fantastic idiot not to," Harry retorted, and Voldemort's face twisted with anger at being spoken to that way. And suddenly, it came to him. The perfect thing to keep Voldemort occupied for a couple of minutes: pretending to underestimate him. It would get him so upset, he wouldn't be able to rest until he'd made sure Harry understood just how much of a bad-ass he was.

"Clever of you, to hide there," Voldemort said. "You were not out of my reach, but I was not yet ready to make my return to publicly known as to attack Hogwarts. Dumbledore's idea, was it not?"

"Not even close," Harry scoffed. "It was mine. But it wasn't so I could hide from you. I just didn't want the publicity. I hate being a celebrity, it's such a headache. Do you want to know why I was really at Hogwarts? To study. Imagine that, going to school to study. I just thought my Ordinary Wizing Levels were more important than you were, was all."

Voldemort was smiling, but it was a cold and furious smile, an expression that was supposed to chill Harry but just made him happy. Harry had gotten to him. Perfect.

“You think you can speak to me in this arrogant way, but let me assure you that you will regret it. You do not believe what you are saying, because you know what I am capable of—”

“I know you’re capable of getting other people to do your dirty work,” Harry said. “I know that your followers are pretty good at sneaking up on innocent people and killing them. Hell, you might even be good at that, yourself. But I haven’t seen anything yet that convinces me you’re a threat worth worrying about. A wizard doesn’t have to be powerful or important to creep into someone’s house in the middle of the night and murder them. They just have to be horrible. There’s a lot of horrible people in the world, and I try not to lose sleep over them. You’re no different.”

Oh, that was too much. That last comment right there. He’d pushed past stalling Voldemort and gone into getting killed territory. Voldemort was not going to let that one lie.

Then Dumbledore arrived. With a whoosh of flame, he stepped out of the fireplace, with Cornelius Fudge and a few members of his retinue on his heels.

“Dumbledore,” Harry sighed with relief. The headmaster strode over to him. The Death Eaters paused to watch him come, and saw their master and the head of the Order of the Phoenix eyeing each other with caution. “You came.” Just in time, too. The Order was starting to look pretty ragged.

“I knew almost immediately that I had been lured away, but I went back to the school, thinking it was there that I was meant to be kept away from. It took me some time to discover what had happened. But yes, I am here.” He faced Voldemort, and he did not look friendly. “Tom.”

“Dumbledore,” Voldemort rasped. “So you come to play the hero and rescue your underlings yet again.”

"I will always come to help a friend in need," Dumbledore replied calmly. "But there is no reason for this to escalate, Tom. No need for anyone else to get hurt tonight. I see that it is already too late for you to get what you came for."

"No," Voldemort said with a chuckle. "Since I really came for him." He looked at Harry again. Harry wanted to shiver, but instead he straightened his shoulders, raised the best shields his mind could produce, and tried to look unafraid.

"Really?" Harry drawled. "I thought you were only good at sneaking."

"I will show you what I can do," Voldemort promised, raising his wand and making Dumbledore whip out his own.

"No!" Harry said, heart pounding wildly. "Hurting people isn't power. I already know you can do that, and I'm not going to fight with you just so you can do that some more. I'll just leave if that's all you've got. I could just go away where you can't find me again, I suppose. Happy hunting." Harry made a show of thinking about it. "Or . . . or you could prove you're worth taking seriously. Do something that actually impresses me."

"Such as?" Voldemort asked. It was obvious that he was only humouring Harry because he was so confident that he thought he had all the time in the world.

"I've heard you cursed the Defense Against the Dark Arts post at Hogwarts," Harry said, a wild thought occurring to him. "But I don't believe it. That kind of magic? You're just a thug, you don't have it in you."

Voldemort began to look very wrathful. Would he admit to having done it, here, in front of Dumbledore?

"But I suppose there's a way of finding out. It seems pretty apparent that the position is cursed. But for it to have been you, well, there's only one way to prove that. You take the curse off."

Voldemort laughed. "Oh, Harry, you truly are a foolish boy," he chuckled.

Harry stared him down. He did not tremble, although it took everything he had not to do it. "Prove it, Voldemort. If Sirius still holds the job come fall, then I'll believe you're worth the time it takes to think about you. If not, I'm getting out of here. You see, I've decided I don't really much like England, so I think I'll just leave again and go into hiding again, and someday, someday that you could never see coming, I'll be back to take out your sorry, murdering ass. When I'm good and ready to. Not now, not like this, not when you want it."

Voldemort was done listening, and he started cursing. Dumbledore, who had remained silent and listened to Harry's strange taunting, came alive. Maybe he'd hoped that they could all walk away from this, but he wasn't about to let Voldemort hurt anyone, either.

It promised to be a magnificent fight, but Harry wasn't going to see it. He was getting out of there before Voldemort could do something to cheapen what he'd just said. If he left now, Voldemort might actually remove the curse on Sirius' job. Harry didn't really think so, but maybe . . . just maybe. He wasn't going to be able to face Voldemort, but Dumbledore could, so he needed to get out of the way. Besides, he wanted to make sure his friends were okay. So he made a run for it and dove into the nearest fire to get out. He'd done his part. The others could take it from here.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Sirius!”

He was battling with a guy who looked really familiar—maybe one of the old bunch—but when he heard Harry shouting his name, he threw up a strong shield and turned to find him.

Harry was crouched in the fireplace, his hand clutched around a fistful of powder. “Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange heard the prophecy!”

“Great! Now get out of here! I can’t fight in this when I’m worried about you!”

Harry nodded, threw down the powder, and disappeared. Sirius returned to the fight with a vengeance, out for blood now that he knew his own disastrous cousin was the one who carried information vital to Voldemort. He fought his way back toward Remus.

“Moony!”

He threw a defensive spell in front of a curse that would have caused his friend mortal injury, which Remus was too distracted by his shouting to stop on his own.

“We’ve got to get to Malfoy and Bella! They’re the ones who heard the prophecy!”

They were taken by surprise and spent a fierce few moments in battle. Then a deafening explosion made them all, even the Death Eaters, duck and look around. They saw Dumbledore and Voldemort locked grimly in battle, and the wizard from the huge golden statue had fallen to the floor and broken into pieces. Remus took the opportunity to Stun and bind the two Death Eaters they’d been fighting, and was making short work of a third, before Sirius jumped back up to help.

“Keep fighting. I’ll get together a plan,” Sirius told him, and moved off. He grabbed Tonks and Dawlish, the first two Aurors he could find, and told them to circle behind Malfoy and Bella while Remus and

himself distracted the two Death Eaters from the front. They quickly moved to do so, and Sirius worked his way back around to Remus to convey the (admittedly sparse) plan. Remus just nodded, sweat pouring down his face, locked in battle. Sirius joined him and put the Death Eater out of commission, then looked for the pair he was after.

“Remus, they’re escaping!” he bellowed, and charged through the fighting to get to them. They were making for the fire, trying to get out, knowing they were too valuable to come to harm or be captured. “Stupefy!” he shouted, flinging the spell in front of him. It struck the wall beside Malfoy, who whipped around with a Dark spell already forming on his lips, and Sirius was forced to duck. Remus had quickly followed him, though, and they became engaged in distracting the two while Tonks and Dawlish moved into position.

“What are you grinning at?” Bella shrieked at him. “Don’t you know that we’ve already won tonight’s little game?”

“This is no game, cousin!” he shouted, paying little attention to the spells he was casting. Binding, stunning, simply causing pain and mayhem, whatever worked. “Relashio!”

“Are you sure? There were children playing, you know! I think one of them was your very own dear little Harry. He was bleeding rather badly, didn’t you notice?”

“Be quiet, Bellatrix! Just do your job!” Malfoy shouted.

“Oh, poor Lucius is in a foul mood, aren’t you dear? Did you know, his own son is on your side? I fear he will have to disown the boy to make it clear to our Lord where his loyalties are.”

Driven on by fury, Malfoy’s spells became even more frightening. Not that he really had anything on Bella in the “frightening” department, but still. Sirius and Remus were hard pressed to keep up. They had to stay on the offensive, but not so that it looked like a rout, or Malfoy and Bella would just escape to get away from them. They had to give the possibility of the Death Eaters beating them to make them stay. It was a delicate balance. That was why it was so great to have Remus to fight beside, like they had when they were younger. He knew what

Sirius was thinking, and he played his part perfectly. So did the Aurors.

"You're smiling again, cousin!" Bella shouted.

"That's because I've won, this time!"

"What?"

"Stupefy!" both Aurors shouted at once.

Bella was too quick, and protected herself. Lucius went down. Bella shrieked in outrage. It chilled the blood, always had, even when they were kids and the high-pitched noise was made because one of her sisters had taken her favourite toy or something.

Tonks began casting rapid spells, but Bella danced around them like a thing possessed. "Don't you ever stop, you bitch?" Tonks hollered.

Remus chuckled a little, and Sirius turned to grin at him. If he'd needed any confirmation that Remus was sweet on her, he'd just gotten it. Remus blushed, but he grinned back.

"No," Bella answered Tonks.

Then she turned around and fired a spell that struck Sirius in the chest. He never knew what hit him. He had time to meet Remus' eyes again, and saw that they were filled with shock rather than amusement. Then he was looking at the ceiling. Then he saw nothing at all.

It took a lot of work to make his eyelids open. They were being stubborn, because they hurt, and eyelids in pain are obstinate eyelids. He was also very tired, despite having an indefinable feeling of having slept for too long already. But the longer he floated on the edge of consciousness, the more he remembered that he needed to be awake, and that there was a lot he didn't know. So he did finally manage to open his eyes, and take in what was around him.

He was laying down, which he'd known already, but he was able to pinpoint his location as some type of hospital, due to the fact that what he was laying on was not his own bed and the room was abnormally white and clean. He turned his head just a bit, wishing he didn't have to because it didn't feel very good, and saw that there was another person here.

"Remus," he tried to say, but the name came out in a croak.

Remus had nodded off in the chair beside the bed, with his head propped up in his hand. When he heard his name, he jerked awake, and his chin slipped off the cup of his palm. He nearly fell out of the chair before he caught himself and straightened up. He just stared at Sirius for a moment, then cracked a smile.

"Glad you finally decided to wake up, you lazy arse."

"Worth it, to see the ever-composed Remus Lupin fall over."

Remus just smiled. "Whatever it took to wake you up."

Sirius frowned and tried to focus his eyes better. Remus looked utterly drained. "How long have I been out?"

"Two days."

"Two— Merlin."

"We've been worried about you, Padfoot. You gave us a scare."

Sirius looked around. "I see the fear of my death hasn't brought about any dramatic and sentimental representation of loyalty from my godson. Where is he?"

"He'll be on his way shortly, now that you've woken up."

Sirius pressed his hands together in supplication. "Tell me that he's out celebrating the fact that we won. I couldn't take being out of commission for two days solid if we lost on top of it."

Remus gave him a smile that was meant to reassure but just looked strained. "Lucius and Bellatrix got away. We tried Obliviating them as they were retreating, but we don't know yet if it worked. If You-Know-Who is aware of the full prophecy, he hasn't made any public statements quite yet."

Sirius sighed.

"But, you know, our side didn't lose anyone—you were a close call, but you keep pulling through somehow—so it wasn't a total loss. Harry is alive, and I know that was the reason you were there."

"Is he okay, though? He didn't get hurt?"

"He's fine."

"He should come down here so I can see that for myself," Sirius said grumpily. He was anxious to make sure. This was likely what Harry had been feeling the last couple of times he'd ended up in the infirmary in Hogwarts, and Sirius suddenly had a lot more sympathy for how crabby Harry had been last summer and during Christmas. "Not that I don't appreciate your being here, Moony."

"No, it's all right, I understand. I've been keeping watch here at Harry's command, you know."

"You mean you've been here the whole time?"

"Yes. I have to say, you're my best friend and everything, but I would have liked to go home and sleep at some point. I'm not allowed."

"Harry demands it, does he? And where is he?"

"Taking his OWLs. He didn't even want to, he wanted to be here himself. I believe his exact words were, you'll pardon me, 'Fuck my future, I need to be with Sirius.' I had to tell him that if you woke up and he'd missed his exams, after everything you went through to get him here, you'd kill him."

“Unless I died,” Sirius added, only now realising just how close he must have been to that.

“In which case your sacrifice would have been meaningless,” Remus frowned. “He wasn’t very happy with me, hence my being here in his stead, and he’s been here studying anytime he wasn’t having an exam. He oughtn’t to be wearing himself thin like that.”

“Moony,” Sirius said gently. “I didn’t die, and I’m sure Harry is getting O’s on all his exams. I know you care about Harry almost as much as I do, but you can relax and stop being such a stuffy old man. We made it. Oh, don’t give me that look. You always were a stuffy old man, even when we were kids.”

Remus smiled at that. “Which I make up for by being an incredible fighter for the Order of the Phoenix, of course. Even when we were kids.”

“Yes, I’m sure you dragged my limp and bleeding body through flames and an army of Inferi simply for the honour of it. Now shut up and tell me what’s been happening while I’ve been out.”

“You know those are mutually exclusive actions, don’t you?” Remus gave his shoulder an affectionate shove, and he winced. His whole body still hurt from whatever Bella had done to him. “Oooo, sorry, Padfoot.”

“What happened to me, exactly?”

“Not a clue what the spell was, but a chap named Yaxley started trying to kick you to death, and the Healers were too worried about figuring out why you were in a coma to spend any time on the bruises. So, um, we’ll get that taken care of now that you’re awake.”

“Appreciate it,” Sirius muttered. “So, what’s happening?”

“Oh, right,” Remus said, settling back in his chair. “We’ll start with the Minister, he—”

There was a knock on the door.

“Not now, I’m learning the fate of the world!” Sirius bellowed.

Remus laughed when the knocking paused, but there could be heard muffled conversation in the hallway. Sirius was just getting warmed up.

“You can shove an exploratory wand up my arse after I figure out if I have to go charging into battle again! Wouldn’t want to waste your time, after all!”

Remus couldn’t stop snickering as the door finally opened and a Healer stepped in, holding himself in a dignified posture and looking down his nose at the source of the trouble.

“I did not realise you had awoken,” he said stiffly. “I was merely knocking to inform Mr. Lupin that Mr. Potter had arrived.”

Sirius sat up straight, ignoring his sudden need to pass out to escape the pain and the rush of blood. “Harry!” he shouted so his voice carried into the corridor. “Harry, I’m awake!”

Harry stood in the doorway, holding a stack of books and parchment. He unceremoniously dumped them onto the Healer, who was too surprised to do much more than let them tumble to the floor. Harry darted forward and threw himself onto the edge of the bed, grabbing Sirius by the shoulders and hugging him tightly. Sirius closed his eyes and held on, ignoring the pain in favour of reassuring himself that his godson had come out of this whole thing intact. It was pretty much a given that he’d been publicly outed by now, and he needed to know that Harry hadn’t been so damaged by it that he was withdrawing again.

“Harry,” Remus said, “he’s pretty beat up, maybe you shouldn’t—”

“Shut it, Remus,” Sirius growled, which was especially effective since his throat was so parched and scratchy. Remus shut it. But Harry had caught on, and he pushed away.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I should have been thinking. Well, I was thinking, actually, I was thinking I'm really happy that you're alive and not in a coma . . ."

"It's fine," Sirius said, taking his hand and squeezing it. "You don't look so good, yourself."

"I'm doing okay," Harry shrugged.

"I'll leave you be for a while," Remus said, standing up. "I was just thinking I was in the mood for a cuppa."

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said. He took the vacated chair. "How long have you been awake?"

"Five minutes," Sirius shrugged. He could feel himself wearing thin already, but he refused to give in. He had to know everything.

Harry withdrew his wand, Transfigured one of his fallen books into a goblet, and filled it with water. He handed it to Sirius, who gulped it down and held it out for more.

"Sip it," Harry said sternly after he filled it again. "You've had nothing in your stomach for two days, I don't want to watch you sick up."

"I'll sip, I promise," he said eagerly, taking another long swallow as soon as it was in his hands. "Thanks, Harry."

"You're welcome. What's Remus been able to tell you?"

"Nothing at all, so it's your job. Let's start with you."

"What about me?"

"You look exhausted."

Harry chuckled without humour. "I haven't slept in a few days, what do you expect? I was fighting in the Ministry all night the first night, and I've been here the past two nights wondering if you were going to

make it. You could have picked a better time to be gravely injured, you arse,” he threw in at the end.

“I’m sorry to worry you,” Sirius said, trying to get comfortable on the bed. “You didn’t get hurt, then?”

“Not much,” Harry shrugged. “I got some very bad cuts from all the glass flying around, and I twisted my ankle, but I didn’t even know about it until the next day because I was so busy running around taking care of things. I made sure the others got to the infirmary and helped sort out their injuries. George was carrying Fred at the end, so he didn’t even realise he was badly wounded until he put him down in front of Madam Pomfrey. I made a pretty big error, you know. I shouldn’t have left them to go after Malfoy and LeStrange, the others wouldn’t have gotten hurt so badly if I’d stayed.”

“Oh, Harry, you couldn’t have saved them all. I mean, really, you’re not that good.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “No, but I was the only one who’d seen a map of the building. None of them knew how to get out. They were fighting amidst all of the creepy experiments the Unspeakables had been doing, trying to find an exit. Draco got attacked by some brains, of all things, and he was acting very oddly. And they said there was this room with this archway, just an archway with a tattered veil, that none of them wanted to go near because it was so strange. But a Death Eater sent a Stunning spell that almost knocked Fred clear through the arch, except that Draco caught him. Of course, George said that Draco was so surprised he’d done anything for anyone on our side that he just dropped Fred on the floor. And I guess Hermione was terrific, I would have liked to have seen it, she was just firing off spells left and right and protecting all the others as much as she could. She got a table knocked into her chest that broke some of her ribs, and she got Cruciatused by Lucius before the fighting really got started, so she was very banged up.”

Sirius listened to this account in silence, but his impatience grew by the minute. Harry hardly ever talked, and now he wouldn’t shut up about the injuries! Would Harry just get to the important stuff, already?

“And? After you checked on them?”

“Oh, I went to the house and waited for you to get back. When you didn’t, I called Dumbledore to see if he was in his office, and he was, but he’d just found out I wasn’t at the school and was on his way to let me know about you—” Here Harry went pale. “He said you might not make it. I got to St. Mungo’s before he had a chance to come over to escort me. I had to see . . .” His eyes swam with tears. “I thought you were going to die,” he muttered.

“For a minute there, it was close,” Sirius answered. He was brimming with impatience by now. “For Merlin’s sake, Harry, what’s going on? Is Voldemort defeated? Are we going to be cast out of England as traitors, or what?”

Harry grinned at him.

“What are you smiling about?”

“You looked like you would fall back to sleep, so I was trying to get you riled up. I guess it worked. You’re awake enough to listen, now?”

Sirius sighed, too weary to laugh. “I think so, yeah.”

“Good. Listen carefully, then, you’ll have to remember all this.”

“I am, I promise.”

“First of all, if the question comes up, of who rounded up the Order and tracked Dumbledore down, the answer is you. You did, okay? When I called the house, you were there.”

Sirius frowned. “Why me?”

“First of all, with you in a coma, it makes you look like a hero, and we need public sympathy so they don’t lynch us for hiding right under their noses. Secondly, because it was actually Snape and if that truth becomes known, his cover with Voldemort is blown.”

“Got it,” Sirius said, nodding. “I did it.”

“And just for the record, Remus’ apologies notwithstanding, you’d better not be sorry for being gone. It’s about time, Sirius.”

Sirius could feel his face reddening. Remus must have told Harry about what they’d been doing. About going out to the pub and trying to pick up women, because they hadn’t done anything like that since they were nineteen years old and they’d needed the escape, and the fun. And like Harry said, he hadn’t had a serious relationship since Catalina four years ago, and it was time for him to move on. At least, it had seemed that way at the time. After what had happened directly after that, it seemed less and less like a good idea to look for female companionship. The fighting was only going to get worse from here.

“And you might want to talk to Remus. If he’s so sorry that the business of women took him away from being ready at a moment’s notice, then he could try one of the women in the Order.”

“A specific woman, perhaps?” Sirius said, and they shared a sly smile, both thinking of a certain woman with a heart-shaped face with a penchant for giving her hair weird colours. Merlin only knew why a rising star like her would be attracted to a man over ten years older than her who was rarely gainfully employed, but she did tend to smile a lot and drop things a lot (well, a lot more) when Remus was around.

“Anyway, after the fight, there wasn’t much Minister Fudge could say. He’d seen Voldemort with his own eyes. He couldn’t exactly say I was hallucinating or lying when the evidence was standing there trying to kill Dumbledore.”

“Indeed,” Sirius mused. “Well?”

“It went public yesterday. The attack on the Ministry was front-page news. They got the reporter to make it look like Fudge was our saving grace, but he was barely even involved. Dumbledore saved us all. If he hadn’t shown up when he did, hadn’t been prepared to fight, Voldemort would have killed everyone. But he made Voldemort retreat, and we didn’t lose a single person. We went public, too, by the way. Didn’t really have a choice, since so many people knew about it.”

"I kind of thought we must have." Sirius rubbed his eyes. "You may have to get me riled up again."

"Well, we managed to make your injured status into a badge of honour, so you came out looking very heroic. You should pretend to stay unconscious for another day or two, couldn't hurt. I came out looking like a freak, but what else is new? I'm kind of a tragic freak deserving of sympathy and support, so that's okay. Dumbledore convinced them to write the story as though I was hiding out for the specific purpose of training myself up into a warrior, which isn't exactly true, and makes me look like anything but a normal teenager—"

"I might point out that it's close enough to the truth, and when have you ever been a normal teenager?"

"Anyway," Harry continued, shooting him a dirty look. "It's all out. Well, most of it. Everyone knows that Voldemort is back and that you and I are here. They're trying to convince me to do an interview, so that I can tell my tragic story, and now that you're awake, they'll want you, too. You know, how we overcame all odds and how you battled against the overwhelming evidence of your betrayal to give me the life my parents wanted for me . . ." Harry trailed off, and showed Sirius his sickened look. "It's such a load of propaganda and rubbish, but we might have to do it."

"I'm going back to sleep now," Sirius murmured, closing his eyes. "Just to escape the whole thing for a few more hours."

Harry just patted his shoulder. "Enjoy it while you can. I have to go back to the school soon so I can take my Defense practical."

Sirius let out a harsh laugh. "I'm sure you're very worried about that."

"I'm not, but I have my Potions exam still, and Snape's been godawful to me ever since the battle. I can't tell if he's afraid I'll blow his cover, or if he really just doesn't like me. Well, he did tell me that I'm an arrogant fool, for rushing into the Ministry like that. He wasn't very happy with me when I told him I was just going there to stall

Voldemort and I knew I might die. Called me a typical Gryffindor and went off in a huff.”

Sirius shook his head, knowing he was smiling uncontrollably.

“What?”

“I haven’t heard you talk this much all at once since you were eight.” He cracked one eyelid back open (and the movement was slightly easier this time, thankfully) to see Harry blushing.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.”

“No, I know. It’s not like me. I think it’s just the relief. You’re going to be okay, and I don’t have any secrets anymore. I can say whatever I want to. Well, in here at least. If I’m going to become a public figure—” Here he paused to make a grotesque face, just in case Sirius didn’t know his feelings on this idea “—I have to watch what I say all the time, don’t I?”

“Probably. Not like you’re not used to it.”

“Yeah. Still, nice to be called by name.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing ‘Professor Black,’” he muttered. He was definitely drifting off now.

“You think you’ll still be there, in the autumn?”

He fought his way back to the surface again so he could look at Harry. The boy was biting his lip fiercely.

“I heard what you said to Voldemort,” Sirius said slowly, knowing he was slurring his words but not able to help it. “He’ll probably do it. He’ll try a bunch of other stuff, but if you don’t respond, his pride won’t be able to take it. He’ll do it. Lift the curse, I mean. He won’t be able to stand the idea that you think he’s weak. Thanks for thinking of that, by the way. Nice to know I’m not going to be dead or fired this summer.”

“Uh, assuming it works, you’re welcome, I guess.”

“Gotta sleep now.”

“Sirius, wait. One more thing.”

“Huh?”

“We have access to our vaults now, you know.”

“Yes. I wasn’t worried about working for money, I just like it. Guess Umbridge won’t be coming back, so I can actually teach something?”

“No, she won’t. She’s been suspended from the Ministry pending an investigation into her torture of innocent children.”

“Has she?”

“I might have, just maybe, mentioned something about where I got the scars on my hand. I mean, the reporter did ask. I can’t help it that he found it horrifying and immediately started interviewing everyone at the school to get the grisly story of her fiendish tyranny. If I cried a little, it’s only because I was being forced to relive those painful memories.”

Harry blinked at him guilelessly.

“Innocent children,” Sirius snorted.

“That’s not the point I was trying to make about the money, anyway.”

Sirius suddenly figured out what he meant. “Oh. Merlin. What did you spend it on?”

“It wasn’t that much,” Harry said defensively. “Sirius, do you know how much money my dad had?”

“Quite a bit,” Sirius grunted. “What did you buy, Harry?”

“I didn’t. Buy anything, I mean. I gave the money away.”

“What? Why? To whom?”

Harry was smiling, which meant he was unashamed of it and he thought Sirius would like it. Sirius relaxed a bit. Harry knew him well enough to know that anything he'd truly be upset about could wait until he got released from the hospital.

“Well, Fred and George were laid up in the infirmary until yesterday afternoon. They missed some of their NEWTs. I felt really bad about that, since it was pretty much my fault that they got involved. They wouldn't have even known about it if I hadn't asked them to provide the distraction for the escape. So I gave them some money.”

“I think I see where this is going,” Sirius said, and he found the energy to smile.

“Yeah, since they missed their tests and it's going to make it hard for them to find jobs, I figured they deserved my help getting their shop started. I put up the money for their rent for a few months, and enough for the start-up supplies. I just went for a nice round number and gave them a thousand Galleons.”

Sirius stared at him. “A thousand?”

“I don't really need it, do I? I didn't exactly put myself in the poorhouse.”

“I know, but a thousand?”

“They made me part owner,” Harry shrugged. “With products like theirs, we'll have a profit in no time.”

Sirius chuckled wearily. “Merlin.”

“What?”

“I'm nearly forty, and the only reason I even have a house is because I'm the only male member of my family. My job is contingent on the whims of a madman. And here you are, not yet sixteen, part owner of

what promises to be a very successful enterprise, and getting interviewed for all the major publications. Not to mention I only have one friend willing to charge into battle with me. Forgive me for feeling unaccomplished.”

Harry poked him. “Don’t forget, they’ll interview you, too.”

Sirius groaned. “Sleep.”

“Fine. But you’d better be awake when I come back.”

Sirius patted his hand. Sort of. He patted a couple of fingers and some of the sheets. Well, it was the best he could do with his eyes closed and his hand barely responding to his suggestions.

“Okay.”

“I’ll go do you proud, then. Be right back.”

“ ’M already so proud,” Sirius sighed, and slept.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Something soft tickled his cheek. He didn't open his eyes. He could smell something nice, some kind of flower, and a whiff of ink, and he knew the soft sensation was just her hair. He couldn't move his arm, since she was laying on it, and he didn't try to move away, even though his hand was tingling and going numb. She stirred slightly, and he knew she was waking up. He opened his eyes when she turned to face him, and felt his heart breaking all over again at the sight of her delicate face raised toward his with a sleepy smile. No one else could hold her like this. Just him.

He waited for her to kiss him good morning. He always waited for her to move first. Sometimes it was hard to hold back, but didn't you have to work hard for everything worth having? And this girl, he thought as she shifted higher to reach his face and he smelled that flower-and-ink smell again, was worth having.

The first kiss was gentle, the perfect way to show someone you were glad to be waking up with them. Then she moved with shocking speed and aggression, and he could only be glad he'd woken up a couple of minutes ago so he could move to meet her quickly enough to please her. The look on her face was confident and teasing, and he grinned, ready to sit back, as it were, and let her run the show.

Then someone tugged on his brain. The only way to describe it was that someone had laid their hands on his thoughts and tried to drag them away. There was only one reason for that, and only one person who'd be trying, and he was forced to start thinking. He was disappointed to realise he was having a dream and this wasn't real, of course, but he had to ignore that and make a decision. The vigorous Occlumency exercises ensured he couldn't be dragged away against his will, but would he go willingly, to see what waited at the end of that persistent tugging?

No, he decided. He wasn't stupid. Voldemort had only seen him acting like a brash teenager, and he couldn't know Harry's motivations for showing up at the Ministry, so he was banking on Harry being the kind of person who'd respond to the tugging, who'd rush in without thought. It was a desperate effort to get his attention

after all the other things he'd tried this summer had failed. He wasn't going to respond to it. He couldn't afford to. Despite a burning desire to meet his enemy face-to-face, this was all about protecting Sirius, at least for now. He couldn't give in.

So he shoved back. "Leave me alone!"

"You think you can stand against me?" whispered the silken voice.

Despite himself, he listened, and he answered. "I already have."

"Only because I have allowed it. I can afford it. There can only be one victor between us, and I cannot die."

"I never said I wanted to kill you."

"Did you hear me? I am immortal. Surrender now, and I may be lenient to your friends."

Harry forced laughter. "Lenient? You couldn't hurt them if you wanted to, not without your cronies to back you up. Now sod off!"

Harry threw up his barriers as strongly as possible, so hard that . . .

He stared at his ceiling. He'd woken himself up. He rolled on his side and tried to go back to sleep (because he'd be damned if he'd be tired in the morning because of Voldemort tried to whisper to him in his dreams) but he was too disgusted with himself to sleep. He should never have listened to that first whisper, he should have reinforced his mental barriers the minute he felt the tug. He'd allowed himself to be goaded into having the conversation, just like Voldemort had wanted. He was just trying to intimidate Harry, and the more Harry responded, the more it was obviously working.

The dream he'd been having before Voldemort started in on him caught his attention, and he didn't know whether to just enjoy the dream or feel ashamed of himself. She was his friend, his best friend, he shouldn't think about her like that . . .

Harry rolled out of bed, knowing he wasn't going back to sleep, and went to Sirius' door. He knocked softly, not wanting to wake up Remus who was sleeping in the room two doors down. Sirius opened the door with his wand, standing a few feet back in the room in a dueling stance. Harry laughed softly.

"Just me."

"Merlin, Harry, it's the middle of the night. What's going on?"

"I'll tell you if you'll put the wand down."

"Oh, right. What are you doing up?"

Harry grimaced. "Dreaming. It wasn't much fun, and now I can't go back to sleep. I'm going out for a bit."

Sirius frowned, scrubbing his face to wake himself up and trying to grasp the conversation. "Where are you going?"

Harry held out his arms and waved them. "You know, flying. I just wanted to let you know in case I wasn't back when you woke up."

"Be careful," Sirius said, stepping forward and putting a firm hand on his shoulder. "I know you've practised carrying your wand in your talons, so take it with you. Just in case."

"Okay," Harry said, "but only if you relax. No one could possibly know it's me."

Sirius just frowned.

"Sirius, I'm all right. You're the one who nearly died."

Sirius let him go and sighed. "Fine, I'm going back to bed. You tell me as soon as you get home."

"I will. I'll even cook breakfast if you promise you'll come to the table looking a bit less like you're painfully constipated."

Sirius blinked. He was too sleepy to appreciate it right away, but he finally chuckled. "I'll try to stop being such a pain in the arse. If you haven't learned safety by now, you never will."

"That's right."

"We're going to have a talk about your dream when you get home."

Harry nodded. "Actually, I want to have a quick word with Dumbledore about it as well."

Sirius had been ready to crawl back into bed, but he shot back up at that. "Why?"

"Sirius, we'll talk about it when you wake up. I need to get out and clear my head. You've barely let me out of the house all summer. I need to fly."

"Okay."

Harry left Sirius to his sleep, feeling a bit jealous that Sirius could. He went to his bedroom window, and made sure to put a book on the sill just in case the window fell shut. Then he transformed. It was always the strangest sensation, this shrinking, this sprouting feathers, but there was more to it than that. It was nearly the same feeling that he'd gotten from saying, "My name is Evan Rivers." It was freedom that coursed through him with the magic. As an owl, he was nothing. Just another bird in the sky at best, and some wizard's pet at worst. He would never be noticed, and he didn't have to worry. He could revel in the feeling of soaring, of wind rushing by him, of the stars and the cool air and the darkness. There was nothing but him and sky.

He was practicing quick transformations, and he was having a great deal of fun taking risks. So instead of soaring right away, he just found the tallest building possible, landed atop it, and transformed back into himself. He crouched on top of the building, gathering his courage. He backed away from the edge, took several deep breaths, then took a running leap and flung himself off. He gritted his teeth to keep from screaming, and transformed again. His wings sprouted and he spread them and flapped madly. He arrested his freefall seven

feet in the air and climbed back into the sky. He was also testing his endurance. He'd find other buildings and do this at least twice more tonight, until he could no longer be sure he'd have the strength to transform again. If he was going to be out, he'd take the opportunity to train himself a bit. His jokes and attitude with Sirius aside, he knew it was important. Even as an owl, he was part of a war. He had to be ready for anything.

Harry was glad he'd put the book in the windowsill, since the window had slipped down while he was away. He didn't want to come in and out the front door since transforming on the front walk would get a bit conspicuous, but this business with the window was a little ridiculous. He was small enough as an owl to slip in under the upright book, and he transformed without bothering with clothes. He needed a shower. A shower in which he would not, not even once, think about his dream about Hermione.

He came downstairs and started breakfast after his shower, just as he'd promised. His hair, which he'd chopped off the minute his identity was out and his scar went on proud display, was spiky with water and sticking straight up. He was enjoying having his own glasses again, since he'd never really liked the contacts, but he was having to readjust to the feeling of them on the bridge of his nose, and he kept rubbing there as he cooked the eggs.

Remus appeared in the kitchen first, looking bleary-eyed and oblivious, intent on coffee to the exclusion of everything else. Harry liked to joke that it was possible Remus and Lily had something going back when his mother had married James, with the way Harry and Remus shared a caffeine dependence (not to mention book dependence). Remus got all the way to the pot and was two sips into his first cup before he even noticed there was anyone else in the kitchen. He jumped, almost spilling his coffee.

"James?" he muttered. Then he shook his head. "Merlin, sorry, Harry, I didn't know you were in here."

Okay, I'm definitely the son of James Potter, Harry thought to himself, but he just grinned. "I'm standing right here cooking breakfast, you know. Who did you think started the coffee?"

"How long have you been up? It's six o'clock in the morning."

"Since about two-thirty," Harry answered, his voice dry.

Remus made a face. "Couldn't sleep, then?"

"Yeah, I went out."

"Well, well, Archie, how was it?" Remus looked around at the breakfast fixings. "How do you have this much energy?"

Harry shrugged, and felt the shivering weakness in his shoulders. He'd worked himself hard the last few hours, and the hot water in the shower was all that stood between him and severely sore muscles. "Like I said, flying is good for me."

Remus only had one response. More coffee. "You make me feel like such an old man," he grumbled. "I thought you and Sirius had got me in great shape, but there's no way I could stay up all night like that."

"Well, I am only fifteen."

"Not for much longer, though," Remus reminded him. "We ought to throw you a party, when was the last time you had a birthday party?"

"Uh, never," he muttered. "I don't want one, please, please, please, don't do it," he begged as he saw the look on Remus' face.

"I'm going to talk to Sirius."

"No, you're not."

"Why not?" Sirius asked in a croaky voice as he shuffled into the kitchen.

"I'm not having a birthday party," Harry said firmly.

Sirius shrugged. "Okay, if you don't want one." He ignored Remus' consternation. "What do you want for your birthday, if not a party?"

“Nothing. I hate birthdays, they’re stupid.”

Remus looked like he was going to argue this point, but Sirius had other concerns on his mind.

“We need to talk about what happened last night, Harry.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “After we eat. I need to go see Dumbledore, okay?”

“Right, you said that. Fine, we’ll eat, then we’ll talk.”

“Harry, come in,” Dumbledore said pleasantly, holding open his office door. “Sirius told me you’d be coming by soon, but he didn’t say what you needed. Is there anything wrong, my boy?”

Harry sat down in his favourite chair in the office. He took a deep breath and braced his hands on his knees before he asked the question he was certain he wouldn’t like the answer to. Even if the answer was “I don’t know,” that wouldn’t be a good thing.

“Do you know of any reason for Voldemort to think he was invincible?”

Dumbledore immediately lost the pleasant look and gave Harry a sharp look. “What’s happened?”

Not, “Has something happened?” or “What makes you ask such a thing?” Harry noticed. He did know something.

“He tried to get into my head again. He hasn’t ever since Snape said he warned him I would be able to get into his head, but he did last night. I think he’s getting desperate.”

“You have not responded to the number of people he has been killing the last few months. He does not take kindly to the idea that the person he considers his destined enemy ignores him.”

Harry nodded. "He was trying to goad me into a fight. He said he was the only possible victor, because he is immortal. He actually said, 'I cannot die.' What would make him say that, sir?"

Dumbledore looked stricken. He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small, wrinkled, ink-spattered book. "This is the diary that took possession of Neville during his second year here at Hogwarts."

Harry wasn't sure where this was going, but he reached out his hand. "May I?"

Dumbledore passed him the diary, and Harry examined it. It looked pretty thoroughly destroyed, but there wasn't much else to see. He handed it back, and just raised his eyebrows and waited.

"I have kept this diary for the past several years because of what happened to Neville, and what it took to destroy it. I had to use basilisk venom to remove the risk of the diary possessing anyone else. Because of that, I believe that Voldemort infused this diary with a piece of himself, a branch of Dark magic that has been deeply buried in recent years. I have spent most of this summer gathering information concerning my suspicions on this subject. I am not yet ready to share that information, but you will be the first person I speak to when I have discovered enough to form a clear opinion."

Harry gaped at Dumbledore. "Sir, you don't mean he was serious. That he really is immortal."

Dumbledore's face became guarded. "As I said, Harry, you will be the first person I speak to when I gather more information."

Harry sighed with frustration. Dumbledore was probably right not to speculate without any evidence, but this was a topic that he would really like to have settled, even if the answer was "yes, he's immortal." He wasn't sure how he was supposed to not worry himself to death over this idea. Of course, Dumbledore didn't say he shouldn't. The headmaster was obviously pretty worried. Although it did convince Harry that if Voldemort ever so much as accidentally shared an emotion again, Harry was going to build actual walls to supplement his mental walls. Preferably in Antarctica.

Yeah, this war was going to suck.

There was a brief knock on the door, and Snape stepped in. He saw Harry and stopped, surprised to see him and giving him a sneering look.

"Mr. Potter," he said quietly. "It was not my intention to interrupt. Headmaster, I will return later."

He was carrying some kind of potion.

"Nonsense, Severus," Dumbledore said, and waved him forward. "Is that the Polyjuice?"

"It is."

"Very good. Have you informed Mr. Malfoy to make his way to my office?"

"I have. He will be here shortly."

"Well, then, Harry, I'm afraid I have other business to attend to."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, standing up. "Sorry to bother you."

"Do not ever think so," Dumbledore said, finally able to smile again. "You may come to me any time you have a concern. I appreciate that you shared this information with me, and I hope that you will continue to come to me when such incidents occur."

"Hah, I'm kind of hoping they won't occur."

"If you do not need me any further, Headmaster," Snape interrupted, bowing a little and backing toward the door.

"Thank you, Severus. I will keep you informed about this situation."

After Snape had gone, Harry felt free to ask, "What's the Polyjuice for, sir? For Draco? You have some kind of plan for him?"

“Ah, yes, I had forgotten his refusal to speak to you ever again. I had almost hoped he would inform you himself. I do not feel it would be good for him to hide himself at the school all summer, alone, but we are afraid that Death Eaters would target him. So I have found a place for him to go, and he will be using the Polyjuice Potion to avoid being found by his father or any of Voldemort’s other supporters.”

“He would really have to stay at the school otherwise?” Harry asked skeptically. “I don’t think his father would kill him, Headmaster.”

“I do not think he would, no. But he has banned him from their family home and removed his financial support. I think that if Draco had gone to him directly following the incident in the Department of Mysteries, his father may have accepted his apology, but things were complicated by his stay in the infirmary here.” Dumbledore had a sad little smile. “We may even hope that Draco no longer wishes to return to his father and side with Voldemort. He has not yet chosen to confide in anyone here, but perhaps you may speak to him when he has had a little more time to accept his position.”

Harry shrugged. “I’ll talk to him right now if he feels like it, but you’re probably right, he’d probably try to kill me. I’ll give him a few more weeks.”

“Thank you, Harry.”

“And so I’d better get out of here before he comes, huh?” Harry said with a smile. “Thanks for talking to me, sir.”

“Anytime, Harry.”

Harry made a quick escape. He wasn’t worried about Draco killing him, but he didn’t much want to fight with him, either. The longer they went without having their final argument, the longer it would be before Draco tried once again to join Voldemort’s cause.

As had become normal over the last few weeks, Harry rose first, his mind too plagued by his worries to sleep in, and began breakfast. Remus would be down for coffee soon, they would chat for a few

minutes before Sirius got up, then they would probably do some jiu jitsu practice before Sirius spent a few hours working on amazing lesson plans for the upcoming school year. At first, Kreacher had resented that Harry cooked breakfast every morning, since this was, along with lunch, dinner, and keeping house, his job, but he'd gotten used to it. He even seemed to like Harry again. Harry had the feeling that Kreacher just got lonely when they were all gone for school and work, and he liked having them here making noise to fill the house and messes for him to clean.

Pancakes, Harry decided after surveying what was in the pantry and the icebox. Pancakes with fresh fruit and berries on top, that would be fantastic. He'd only just gotten everything out onto the countertop before Remus came in and poured his first cup.

"Morning," he said cheerfully, knowing it was too early to get a coherent response out of Remus, but that was half the fun.

"Morning," he yawned back. "Mmm, pancakes," he muttered appreciatively. He eyed Harry over the rim of his mug. "You know, you look more like your father every time I see you. That includes the bad hair."

"Says the man who didn't comb his yet. The gray is showing."

Remus made a face at him. "We can't all be fifteen."

"None of are fifteen, actually."

"You're— oh, right. That's today. Hey, wait a minute, what are you doing cooking breakfast, it's your birthday," Remus said in a scolding tone, shoving Harry away with his shoulder and removing the little paring knife he was using on the fruit. "I'll do it. You sit down and celebrate."

"I never really understood why people throw parties on birthdays. It's kind of like, 'congratulations, you managed to keep your heart beating another year.'"

Remus gave him a sort of grim smile as he took over the breakfast preparation. "Well, Harry, I hate to tell you this, but congratulations on keeping your heart beating another year. Here's to another."

Harry laughed darkly as he took a seat at the kitchen table and started nursing his own cup of coffee. He hadn't really thought about it until he said it, but he supposed congratulations were in order. Come Sirius' birthday, Harry was going to have to throw him a truly amazing party. In fact, if birthdays were about celebrating the fact that a person had struggled through and not died, there were a lot of birthdays he needed to start taking more seriously, including the man cooking him breakfast. It could have been him hit with that spell from Lestrage. It could have been Neville or Fred or Hermione, as well. Maybe he ought to enjoy his birthday, after all.

"Well, Remus, in that case, feel free to cook me breakfast."

"Aren't you going out to meet your friend Hermione later?"

"Yes. We promised we'd open our OWL results together today."

Sirius shuffled into the room right then. "You already have them?" he asked in a scratchy voice.

"Yeah, they came yesterday."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"You'd have made me open them. I promised to wait for Hermione."

The look the two men gave him made him blush. Then he remembered the dream he'd started out having before Voldemort interrupted a few weeks ago, and he had to duck his head and concentrate on his coffee because he felt like his face was on fire.

"Harry, I know you said you weren't, um, well you weren't, but . . . were you lying?" Sirius asked, raising his eyebrow at his godson as he adopted the task of mixing the pancake batter.

“No,” Harry snapped. Ducking even further over his mug, he mumbled, “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to.”

Both men snickered, then they took pity on him and changed the subject. It was his birthday, after all. But it hardly bore thinking about, anyway. This was Hermione Granger they were talking about. Beautifully thick and shiny brown hair aside (and beautiful face, and beautiful smile, and beautiful eyes, and a body delicate as a bird’s, not to mention a beautiful and courageous soul), she was not ready for a physical relationship. But hey, it was his birthday. It was a good day to wish that when she was ready, she’d pick him.

When Harry greeted Hermione in Diagon Alley, the awkward feeling he’d been having about seeing her melted away. She was smiling with happiness to see him, and she ran forward to hug him, and it was easy to remember that they were friends and they didn’t have to worry about that kind of thing. Harry’s private thoughts about how attractive she was becoming didn’t have to be an issue.

“Are you ready?” she asked, brimming with excitement and clutching his arm.

Merlin, it was going to be harder to forget about than he’d thought.

“Yeah, I am. I thought Sirius was going to kill me when he found out I’d already gotten my results and I hadn’t shown them to him. But I made a promise, after all.”

“Well, let’s do it! Do you know how hard it’s been to wait?”

“Where do you want to go?”

She linked her arm through his. “It’s your birthday, Harry. Let’s get some ice cream.”

So they sat down at Florean Fortescue’s and pulled out their envelopes, embossed with unbroken Hogwarts seals, and grinned at one another.

“Okay. Go!”

They tore into them. Hermione squealed.

“Harry, I got an ‘O’ in Defense! I got an ‘O’!”

“I got an ‘E’ in Ancient Runes, Hermione!”

“Thank you!” they both said to one another simultaneously, then laughed. They traded papers, exclaimed some more, and realised that neither of them had gotten anything less than an ‘E’ in any subject. It was great news for them in any case, but Harry decided that turning sixteen was a great thing entirely. After the summer he’d been having, he needed today. Ice cream with his best friend to celebrate being one of Hogwarts’ top students? That beat counting Voldemort’s death toll.

“It’s nice to be able to call you Harry, now,” Hermione said when they had finally stopped studying their results papers. “It got to be hard to remember to do it toward the end of the school year, when I kept seeing the real you showing through.”

“What do you mean, the real me? I was being the real me.”

“Mostly. But Evan Rivers tried to keep his head down. The real you showed up that night when you stood up to Umbridge and You-Know-Who.”

“Voldemort,” he prompted. He’d told her his feelings about that name.

“All right, Voldemort then.” But that made her smile. “That’s just like you. It’s not that you’re not afraid. It’s that you won’t let yourself be afraid, and certainly not intimidated. When you make up your mind to do something, you throw your heart and soul into it, Harry. Even being Harry Potter, which you’ve finally decided to do.”

He blushed. “I guess I have.”

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, sounding shy.

He smiled. “Thanks. I’m pretty proud of you, too.”

“Me? Why?” Now she was blushing.

“You’re not the same person you were when I met you last year,” he said. “You’re stronger, now. You’re amazing, actually.”

“Thanks to you.”

“No. Not really. I’m glad I could help, but you’re strong in yourself. You didn’t need me.”

Hermione lost her smile, but not her blush. “But I do. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Then we have something else to agree on.”

“You know, most guys think girls are supposed to be tiny and delicate little hothouse flowers,” Hermione said. Her voice said she was testing him. “They’re not supposed to be strong, they’re supposed to need protection.”

Harry just grinned. “You certainly are tiny and delicate, and I’d love to protect you, but I know I don’t have to. You ought to meet some of the women I knew when I was younger.”

“What women?” she asked suspiciously.

“Sirius’ women, mostly. Mona, she was a single mother who’d pretty much single-handedly chased off her son’s deadbeat dad. And there was a whole string of women in Japan who were very strong. Survivors. Then Catalina. There hasn’t really been anyone after her. She’s the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever really had, and boy does she exemplify self-empowered women. She was always cooking and cleaning, but don’t get any ideas that she was doing it to serve you. She loved to dance, and she was beautiful. Sirius was totally under her power. She and her brother Miguel were our family. Miguel’s the one who taught me everything I know about fighting without a wand.”

“What happened?”

Harry shrugged. "Sirius wanted to marry her, but he was too committed to raising me. Catalina's a Muggle, and I wasn't getting any wizardry training. We had to move. Sirius said she'd be better off with a Muggle man who wouldn't put her in danger. When Voldemort was looking for me, he found Miguel and Catalina, and they fled in the middle of the night. We'll never find them again without a lot of effort, and Sirius says we can't, that we need to let them have their new life."

"You both have had such a hard life, but I feel sorry for her, too" Hermione said softly. She gave him a quirky smile. "At least I'll never have to worry about getting dumped because I can't defend myself."

Harry smiled. "No, don't worry about that."

"Assuming I ever . . ."

"You will," Harry assured her. "One day, you'll meet a great guy, and right at that minute, you'll be ready for a boyfriend."

"That's not true," she said glumly.

"Sure it is."

She looked down at the table. "I already met a great guy, and I wasn't ready right then. Sometimes I still wonder if I'm ready." She looked at him, but without lifting her head, so she could hide behind her hair again if she had to.

Harry felt his heart start to thump, and the confusion he'd been feeling was back full-force. She was trying to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear, but maybe he was just imagining it. Maybe this was just light-hearted conversation for her, maybe she meant someone else. But he still put his hand, palm up, on top of the table.

"Hermione?" he said softly.

She looked at his hand.

"I understand that you'd want to take it slow. And I don't mind. So long as you don't mind that my hand comes with all kinds of death threats attached."

Hermione just kept looking at his hand. He started chewing on his lip, and any second he was going to take his hand back and hope they could forget about this.

"You always do that when you're nervous," she whispered, and carefully laid her hand over his. "It's very cute."

"I'll have to work on that. I can't have a tell." He said it seriously, but he was grinning and squeezing her hand, and working on having a better poker face was something for the distant future, because this moment was going to last forever. This was not someone he was planning to walk away from. He knew that teenage romances usually didn't work out, but this wasn't exactly a romance and the painful breakup, if there was one, was still far away. He was holding her hand, and it was different this time. This time, it meant something else, something special. He wanted more, but he could wait. This was what she was ready for.

"Isn't this adorable?" drawled an unfamiliar voice.

They turned around sharply, but Harry kept a firm grip on her hand. He wasn't embarrassed, no matter who it was. But he didn't know the guy. It was just a young guy, a few pimples, not much older than they were. He was wearing a half-apron tied around his waist, so he worked as a server here. Dark hair, thick shoulders. Not handsome or ugly, just sort of average.

It was the sneer that gave him away. No one else had that haughty look.

"Draco?" Harry said softly.

"In the flesh," he smirked.

"This is the disguise Dumbledore set up for you?"

“No need to sound so surprised, Potter. I moved fast enough to get the money from my personal account, but that’s my tuition money for school. Now I have to work for a living.”

“How tragic,” Harry said dryly. “You’ve fallen on low times, indeed.”

“I’ve been disowned,” Draco hissed. It sounded so weird, coming from this stranger, but Harry could tell how much pain and worry lurked behind his anger. “This is your fault.”

“I know it is,” Harry said softly. “This wasn’t what I wanted to happen, and I’m sorry. I said I would protect you, and I meant it. I made the Weasleys miss their NEWTs, so I helped them get their shop set up. Have you been to it, by the way? It’s just down the street, and it’s brilliant.”

“I wouldn’t go there for the world.”

“What I’m saying is, Draco, your association with me has made things difficult, and I feel responsible. If you need money . . .”

“I’m not a charity case like your friend Lupin,” he responded.

“Yet another man who has a job and works for a living,” Harry said. “Not a charity case. And it’s not charity, it’s payment for services rendered. That’s not even the issue. The issue is that you’re right, this is my fault. I want to help you.”

Draco threw their check on the table with disgust. “I don’t need anything more from you. You’ll just make it worse.” He stalked away.

Harry left a big tip.

“You’re not adding insult to injury or anything,” Hermione murmured.

Harry grinned. “If he can be like that, so can I. Come on, let’s not sit here and make it worse.”

“Where do you want to go?”

"Let's just go for a walk. Have you seen Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes yet?"

"No."

"Let's head that way, then. But first, I have something to show you."

Harry pulled the letter out of his pocket. He'd read it three times in the past couple of days, ever since it had come. It was a response to the letter he'd written Sascha, his old Potions tutor. Sascha knew all kinds of strange and arcane bits of magic, and he'd been Harry's only hope, aside from months of research.

"I wrote to an old friend of mine about something Dumbledore and I talked about. We were talking about Voldemort. Voldemort interrupted my sleep a few weeks ago to tell me, very smugly, that he's immortal. I didn't believe him, of course, but when I talked to Dumbledore, he said that it confirmed suspicions he'd had about the diary that Neville got possessed by. So I asked my friend if he knew anything about this topic. This is what my friend wrote back."

Dear Evan,

It is wonderful to hear from my old student! I hope that you have not neglected your Potions studies, and that you are still looking for perfection in your art. I can see that you are as scholarly as ever, and I am glad to know it. But the subject you are studying concerns me. Your question, about how one could infuse an object with a piece of oneself to make oneself immortal, this is a dangerous area of study. I know of only one way to do this, and it is the Darkest magic, called a Horcrux. Only an evil man could divide his soul so that he could put it into something else, a violent and murderous man. I will not tell you more, because I refuse to encourage this course of study. Find another project, I beg of you. You have too much potential to go down such a road.

I hope that you will continue to study with such effort, of course, but only choose more appropriate subjects. I am sure that your father can direct you to much better projects for your classes.

I am happy to hear from you and know you are doing well, but you neglected to mention where you currently reside. Are you still in Australia? Tell me all about what you and your father are up to.

Best wishes,

Sascha

"I don't want him to know who he was really tutoring, since he hasn't figured it out on his own," Harry said when Hermione reached the end of the letter. "The more people that I can protect from being targets of Voldemort, the better."

"You think that Voldemort did this Horcrux thing to that diary?" Hermione asked, keeping her voice quiet.

"I don't know, but probably."

"We should tell Dumbledore."

"I think he already knows. But he promised to talk to me soon, anyway. We'll compare notes. What I'm really afraid of is that it's not just the diary."

"You think he has more than one?"

"The diary was destroyed years ago. He must."

Hermione shivered. Harry snaked an arm around her waist.

"Harry," she said.

"I'll be good," he promised. He left his arm in place, and she made no protests. They strolled slowly toward the flashy windows of Fred and George's shop. It was the most eye-catching thing on the street.

Things were getting dark, Harry thought. People were dying, and it was only getting worse with time. Voldemort wouldn't give up. He had heard and believed the whole of the prophecy. And if he had truly infused objects with his soul so that he could not die, however that

was achieved, then their stance against him seemed hopeless. The war was all they could afford to think about.

But Hermione was at his side, and it was his birthday, and they were heading toward the only thing Harry could look at and say he helped to create. Things were getting dark, but there was still enough light to see by.

A/N: First of all, I would like to thank everyone for their sympathy about the burglary. No news on catching the people responsible, but we've changed all the locks and we feel like we're safe. Thank God they didn't take the computer, that's all I really need to say!

Now, then, on to business. This is the final chapter of Book Two. I hope you enjoyed this installment of the tale. I truly enjoyed writing it, and I loved having you all along for the ride. I have a full outline for Book Three, but I need to take a little break. I will probably not begin posting the final installment in the trilogy until the first week of December. If you have me on your author alert list, you'll know when it starts up. I will probably also post an announcement on my profile page.

Because I appreciate all my reviewers so much, I want to thank you all individually. This is a huge list of people, so if you don't feel like reading it, you don't have to, this is the end of the note and the chapter. But I wanted everyone who reviewed to know that I appreciate you. Even if I didn't respond, I read it, and I remembered you. It took me a long time to make this list, so know that you were taken seriously. Thanks to the following 183 people who took the time to let me know what they were thinking:

Acro

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ams71080

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Asgeras

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Athena Hermione Ravett

Autumn Aremega

azphxbird

Black-Hood

BlackRoseFire

bob

Boudicca's Revolt

brwneyedgrl

C

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Crystal Cat-Chan

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hushpuppy22

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Illution

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ImperialJedi

Iniga

James Beston

Jaur

Jay-F

JBf

jennyelf

Jensindenial3516

Jimm

Johnny Bravo J

Junky

JustHereTooRead

Kaeim

karlii

Kathleen LaCorneille

KikiLala

Kitsune no Kutsuu

KlassyMarie

Kneazle

Kylani

Kyntor

Lady Foxy Roxy

Lady of the Hunt

Lady Padfoot21

Lady Saya

Lady Silverhawk

latin-freak

laura sedai

Like A Clockwork Orange

Lilyth Celestyn

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Lt. Cmdr. Radner

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Mari Knickerbocker

Mariposadelaluna

Meany

Meg

mia

Mister Bigbucks

Moon Ecstasy

nancy in chicago

NaruXHinata-Rules

NightOwl999

Niko Nightwind

nljfs

Olaf74

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Osireia

OwlofNight

Pandora of Ithilien

PaulBlay

Paulinho

penghu-dust

peoplhi

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popping corn

Portus

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rekahneko

Rena the pirate jedi wizard

Rigal

robert

RRW

Rukoh

Saffygirl

SavingSaturn

SeaStones

shagen6

Sin Sajori

sinnerman3

SiriusBlackIsGod

SiriusBlackLivesOn

smilingbella

Snowdove30

Someone aka Me

Souliu

spikemyangel

StarUponHeaven

Steel-BonedSelaneen

stinepine

swanpride

Tabbycat1220

Taigh

Tarva

Taure

terracannon876

terrorofthehighway

The French Dark Lord

The Librarian's Assistant

therhoda

tiny099

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toskin

Twinheart

Vellouette

Venus

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vikaaaaaa

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Wayward Fool

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Wolfric

xX Hidden Secret Xx

yaiofanboy

ZeroTheDestroyer

You guys are amazing!